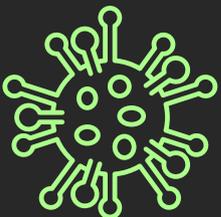




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COVID-19 VACCINES



WHY DO WE NEED COVID-19 VACCINES?

- In a short period of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the deaths of over 2.3 million people worldwide (as of 11 Feb 2021), and has exposed and worsened the violent conditions of capitalism. Vaccines are not a magical solution to the pandemic, but are an important and necessary part of overcoming the virus and alleviating the burden on the healthcare system and its workers.
- Vaccines are why diseases which were previously common and had high death rates, such as smallpox, polio and the measles, have either been eradicated or contained. If a large percentage of the population is vaccinated, we can not only drastically lower hospitalisation and death rates but achieve population immunity, where the virus can no longer rapidly spread from person to person.
- South Africa has felt the devastating impacts of the pandemic, not only through 1.5 million infections and over 40 000 deaths, but also in relation to increased unemployment, poverty, inequality, gender-based violence and state repression. Further, new variants of the virus confirm the need to develop adapted and new vaccines.

PEOPLE-LED AND FACT-BASED POPULAR EDUCATION

- There is a lot of uncertainty, apprehension and misinformation surrounding COVID-19 vaccines in South Africa. To overcome this, there is a need for widespread research-based popular education involving all sectors of society, including healthcare workers, unions, government and the private sector.
- While the scepticism towards vaccines is understandable given the disturbing history of medical imperialism and experimentation on black people, vaccines have also played an important role on the African continent in overcoming a number of epidemics and preventing deaths and have, in this way, also had a pro-poor impact.
- Similar to how social movements were central in the fight against the denialism and conspiracy theories around HIV/AIDS and in pushing the government to make antiretroviral drugs available, the struggle for COVID-19 vaccines and accurate information around them must also be led by the people.
- Our approach to vaccines must be based on proven scientific evidence that is peer-reviewed and independently checked. We cannot rely on misleading social media posts which ignore the facts.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

Below are some incorrect statements that have been circulating about the COVID-19 vaccines:



MYTH 1: THE VACCINES ARE UNSAFE BECAUSE THE TRIALS WERE RUSHED

- While it is true that COVID-19 vaccines have been and continue to be developed in record time, there is no evidence to suggest shortcuts were taken with regard to safety protocols. For previous vaccines, independent experts would wait until clinical trials were complete before scrutinising data. In the case of COVID-19, data was analysed as the information came in to speed up the process. In addition, the COVID-19 vaccines benefitted from decades of research into coronaviruses, meaning that scientists were not starting from scratch.

MYTH 2: THE VACCINES CAUSE INFERTILITY AND OTHER SIDE EFFECTS

- The idea that the vaccines cause infertility started because of a rumour that the protein which the vaccines train our bodies to identify and attack is similar to a protein required for the placenta to attach to the uterus throughout pregnancy, and the body might get confused and attack this vital protein as well, causing infertility. This is untrue- the proteins are in no way similar enough to confuse our immune systems and the vaccines will not affect fertility.
- There is little evidence to suggest that the vaccines will lead to long-term side effects since they do most of their job in the first few days and then leave the body, having taught our immune systems how to fight the virus. In reality, long-term heart and lung complications as a result of catching COVID-19 are far more likely.
- Some people have experienced short-term side effects which are similar to the side effects of other vaccines, such as fatigue or muscle pain. Such reactions are normal and usually short-lived, and they are a sign that the vaccine is working.

MYTH 3: THE VACCINES WILL GIVE YOU COVID-19 OR MAKE YOU MORE VULNERABLE TO CONTRACTING OTHER ILLNESSES

- It is not possible for the vaccines to give you COVID-19 because the vaccines do not contain any active forms of the virus. Vaccines work by training your immune system to recognise and fight a virus but cannot cause infections themselves. Vaccines do not weaken but rather boost your immune system and therefore do not make you more vulnerable to other illnesses.

AROUND THE VACCINES

MYTH 4: IT IS SAFER TO CONTRACT THE VIRUS AND FIGHT IT THAN TO GET A VACCINE

- We do not yet have enough information to know how long the natural immunity people get after recovering from COVID-19 lasts, but it does appear to be shorter than the immunity provided by the vaccines. As we have seen in the pandemic, it is possible that people who have been infected with COVID-19 and recovered can become sick with the virus again. In addition, there are many risks related to contracting the virus, including the possibility of drawn-out symptoms and long-term complications, critical illness, and death. Getting vaccinated means not only protecting yourself but also protecting people in your community who might be more vulnerable than you.

MYTH 5: THE VACCINES ARE BEING USED TO CHANGE OUR DNA OR INJECT MICROCHIPS

- There is confusion around the fact that some COVID-19 vaccines contain messenger RNA (mRNA). mRNA are molecules which carry instructions for producing proteins from one part of a cell to another. While mRNA is made from DNA (genetic material), it does not contain DNA. It cannot change our DNA because it cannot enter the part of our cells that contain DNA. Once the mRNA does its job of teaching our immune system to recognise and attack the virus, our cells break it down so it is no longer present in our body.
- There is no evidence that the vaccines contain microchips. In reality, powerful elites who wish to track and surveil us can already do so through our cellphones (and we must continue to expose and resist this).
- The theories that the vaccines are designed to change our DNA or to inject microchips into us is driven by the idea that the vaccines are being pushed on people against their will. In reality, they are actually being withheld from the poor and socially-excluded through exclusive contracts and patents which restrict free access, while political and economic elites are prioritised as first in line to receive vaccines.



TOWARDS A PUBLIC AND EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF VACCINES!



- Vaccines must be made widely and freely available. There must be a collective, public approach to the development, costing and distribution of all vaccines, as opposed to the privatised vaccine nationalism currently underway. This will require the government to adopt an approach that serves people over profit. We should learn from countries in the Global South which have successfully managed to control the virus so far, such as Cuba, Vietnam, Taiwan and Mauritius, for positive examples of what can be done in parallel to vaccinations.
- Big Pharma must not be allowed to make super-profits and own the intellectual property rights. The neoliberal model of outsourcing and using middle companies which profit from the rollout of vaccines must be rejected. Vaccines are a public good and their development has been largely paid for through public funds. Vaccines must be decommodified and made available for free to all.
- There must not be a class or racial hierarchy in the distribution of the vaccines. After the groups of people identified as first in line, the vaccines must be equitably distributed to all.
- Since there is a great deal of justified distrust of the South African government's ability to deliver basic public goods and services, and to act in the interests of the poor and working class, there must be meaningful involvement of workers and communities in the roll-out of the vaccine programme.

THE WORKING CLASS MUST CONTINUE TO BUILD UNITY AND ORGANISE TO FIGHT FOR THE VACCINES, FOR AN END TO THE PANDEMIC, AND ULTIMATELY TO REPLACE A DEADLY AND GREEDY CAPITALIST SYSTEM!



The International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) is an independent NGO providing research, popular education, publications and platforms to forge solidarity for community organisations, labour and social movements.

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