

UK pubs reopen in “Super Saturday”: A criminal act

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Pubs, restaurants and hotels in the UK will open their doors to the public today for the first time since March, alongside cinemas, museums, hairdressers, outdoor gyms, playgrounds, theme parks and arcades.

This is just four days after a local lockdown was imposed in the city of Leicester, amid reports of coronavirus hotspots mushrooming across the country. Cases of the virus have begun to increase again in at least 36 different areas, including 15 London boroughs.

The government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), admitted yesterday that the “R” (Reproduction) rate of the virus could now be at 1 or higher in all but two UK regions—in London, the Midlands, the North East and Yorkshire, the South East and the South West. In London, the R rate has risen from between 0.7–0.9 to 0.8–1.1. A rate of 1 or above means that the virus is increasing again.

Today has been marketed by the Johnson Conservative government and the media as “Super Saturday.” Its deadly consequences will be revealed in the weeks and months to come.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s call to the nation yesterday to act “safely and sensibly” was naked hypocrisy, a transparent attempt to absolve the government of responsibility for the policy of ending the lockdown and reopening the economy it has been pursuing for the last two weeks. On June 23, Johnson announced the reopening in Parliament with the declaration, “Our long national hibernation is beginning to come to an end.”

Johnson said later that day, “I think it’s great to see people out shopping again and frankly I can’t wait to go to a pub or a restaurant ...” This Thursday, the Treasury tweeted, “Grab a pint and raise a glass, pubs are reopening their doors from 4 July. #OpenForBusiness.”

The relentless propaganda for a party atmosphere brought warnings from health care chiefs and even the police. Chair of the Police Federation John Apter said, “The announcement of this easing of lockdown has been done in such a way that a head of steam will be gathering between now and 4 July, which could be seen by some as a countdown to party time.”

Dr. James Crosbie, National Health Service (NHS) clinical lead for alcohol in the North East of England, said, “The NHS is not in the same place as it was prior to lockdown. COVID-19 precautions mean capacity in the system is reduced at a time when we need to be prepared to both deal with any new cases of the virus and also plan to reduce the backlog of routine cases that have built up.”

Despite the government’s efforts, most people remain highly conscious of the threat posed by the virus. A YouGov survey this week found that 70 percent of people would be nervous about going to the pub or cinema. Sixty percent said they would not go to shopping centres and restaurants. But Johnson is hoping to cynically manipulate the frustrations of a minority—in the interests of multibillion-pound hospitality businesses but more fundamentally the wider return to factories and workplaces.

The government is opening key centres of virus transmission while the UK is still in the middle of the pandemic. In the absence of mass systematic testing, the national lockdown was the only basis for suppressing the virus and this is being dismantled.

Three weeks after reopening nonessential shops and five weeks after partially reopening schools, Leicester became the first UK city to be placed under a local lockdown for an additional fortnight, after recording 944 cases in just two weeks from mid-June—one in 10 of the UK’s reported cases last week.

Independent SAGE member and virologist Deenan Pillay commented, “I am expecting there to be a number of Leicesters. The base level of infections going on in the UK is still much higher than it was in other countries in Europe when they started to release their lockdowns.” Independent SAGE is a group of eminent scientists critical of the government’s handling of the lockdown.

Johnson’s government, with the backing of the Labour Party, has created the conditions for a resurgence of the pandemic. Leicester, run by a Labour council, is a case study in the consequences of their criminal policies. According to Public Health England (PHE), there has been a significant increase in infected people aged under 19, from 5 percent of all cases in May to 15 percent in June, and similar among working-age people. The unsafe reopening of schools and nonenforcement of public health measures in workplaces is to blame.

In the week beginning June 8, two schools in the city, Humberstone Infants School and Humberstone Junior School, were forced to close “for the foreseeable future” after several teachers tested positive for coronavirus. They were joined two weeks later by Moat Community College, Herrick Primary and Whitehall Primary.

There have been outbreaks at the Samworth Brothers Bradgate Bakery, the Pladis biscuit factory in South Wigston, the Ethically Sourced Products clothes factory and other textile plants. Twenty-eight workers at crisp producer Walkers’s Beaumont Leys site—employing 1,400—have been infected, with the company admitting to a “steady increase” in cases throughout June. Young men working in the food processing and garment industries were found by a PHE investigating team to be major vectors of transmission in the recent surge.

Last week, campaign group Labour Behind the Label released a report documenting a “shameful” disregard for safety in multiple garment factories across Leicester. The document highlighted instances of nonexistent social distancing, and workers forced to come in after testing positive for coronavirus. One factory of 80 workers had 15 people sick with COVID-19 and working.

These factories are notorious for their criminal exploitation of mostly immigrant labour. Last year, an investigation by the parliamentary environmental audit

committee found it was an “open secret” that many of the 1,000 or so factories and workshops in the city were paying below the minimum wage—sometimes as little as £3 an hour. Many remained open after the lockdown formally closing nonessential businesses was implemented. The owner of one garment factory told the *Daily Mail*, “[W]e lost so much money during the first lockdown that we cannot afford to close ... So, we will remain open, regardless of what the authorities tell us.”

Leicester’s sweatshops are an egregious example of a process underway across the whole country. PHE stated Thursday that reports of workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 symptoms doubled last week compared to the week before and increased fivefold between May and June. This takes place with the complicity of the trade unions who have kept virus outbreaks hidden from workers and demobilised struggles for safe conditions.

Virus hotspots are emerging across much of northern England and in areas of Wales, closely connected with outbreaks in the food processing industry. According to government data, Leicester saw 140 new infections per 100,000 people in the week to June 21—more than 10 times the UK-wide average. Other large population centres—Bradford, Barnsley, Rochdale and Bedford—had rates of between 40 and 70 new cases per 100,000 per week. In Wales, Merthyr Tydfil—where the Kepal meat plant reported 130 coronavirus cases—had a rate of 177 and Wrexham—where the Rowan Foods meat plant is based—had 75 in the week ending June 29.

The reopening of pubs, restaurants, cinemas, etc., will swell this renewed wave. It gives renewed urgency to the Socialist Equality Party’s call for rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, independent of the unions, to safeguard workers’ lives and those of their families and communities.



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