

COVID-19 outbreaks escalate across England

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UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock admitted this weekend, “Each week there are over a hundred local actions taken [in response to coronavirus outbreaks] across the country—some of these will make the news, but many more are swiftly and silently dealt with.”

This statement made to the *Telegraph* is a marked increase on previously reported figures. The outbreaks are a confirmation that the UK’s epidemic, never fully suppressed, is again spreading out of control.

In Sheffield, an outbreak at a warehouse run by Clipper for fashion retailer Boohoo has infected at least 25 workers. Many more had symptoms but were never tested. Breaking the story at the weekend, the *Sunday Times* reported the words of a 51-year-old father of two who contracted the virus: “I caught it from the warehouse. There’s no way I should have been working. How is distributing cheap women’s fashion essential?”

He explained how he was forced to work 12-hour shifts throughout April and May, saying, “I needed to put food on the table for my kids.” His wife and son have now both tested positive for COVID-19. Another employee told the *Times*, “I watched workers from multiple households travelling to the warehouse in packed cars. It saves money.”

As in all such cases, workers have been raising safety concerns for months, but have been smothered by the continued inaction of government agencies and local politicians. On March 26, a video was circulated on social media showing warehouse employees working close to each other, in clear breach of social distancing guidelines. Labour MP for Sheffield South East, Clive Betts, has received complaints from at least 50 different workers at the site. On March 31, eight days into the national lockdown, one wrote to him, “The warehouse is completely full, people are virtually on top of each other with nothing put in place for social distancing, no PPE [personal protective equipment] whatsoever. It’s a breeding ground for the virus and needs closing down ASAP!”

Betts did nothing other than to write to Boohoo.

Between April and June, Sheffield’s Labour council and Public Health England (PHE) investigated the warehouse and found it had taken “reasonable steps” to ensure workers’ safety. Following the *Times* investigation, Clipper and Boohoo were able to respond, “The warehouse has been inspected a number of times by Public Health England and Sheffield City Council and has been approved each time.”

Echoing the excuse of corporations the world over, Sheffield Council’s director of public health, Greg Fell, said virus transmission was more likely to have occurred “within households in the local community.” He did not elaborate on the implications of this statement for the “local community,” nor what geographical location he was referring to.

This follows a spike of coronavirus cases in Leicester two weeks ago, forcing a local lockdown of the city, which has been widely linked to conditions in unsafe garment sweatshops manufacturing primarily for Boohoo.

Another major outbreak was reported over the weekend on Mathon Farm in Herefordshire, run by vegetable producers AS Green and Co—which supplies major supermarket chains like Tesco, Aldi, Sainsbury’s, Waitrose, Asda and M&S. So far, 74 of the farm’s picking and packing workers have tested positive for COVID-19, and 200 are being required to self-isolate.

The seasonal employees, predominantly from Eastern Europe, live in small bunkhouses on site during the harvest season. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned in May, when Prince Charles was wheeled out to encourage furloughed and unemployed workers to “Pick for Britain” during the summer harvest, “In the middle of a pandemic, these living conditions are clearly dangerous.”

Two workers, Leak Johnson and Brandon Burridge, who joined the farm under the Pick for Britain scheme and left on July 2 told the BBC yesterday that they had been required to share a toilet with 60 other people. Their induction to the site had been carried out with 15 other people all sitting on shared benches. Johnson added, “There was nothing about hand sanitiser, we weren’t

given any. We were not allowed to wear gloves.” Neither was contacted about the outbreak at the farm and they were barred from their team’s WhatsApp group for asking questions.

In Wakefield, West Yorkshire, an outbreak at Urban House asylum centre has put over 200 asylum seekers in quarantine for two weeks. In March, the *Independent* reported that residents at Urban House were being forced to eat in crowded communal spaces. Mears Group, who run the facility, claimed to have addressed the issue, but a photo was released on April 28 showing residents still being required to eat meals less than a metre from each other.

Majid, an Iranian asylum seeker at Urban House, told the *Independent*, “Everyone is full of fear, stress and anxiety. We’re talking about life or death. In here, there are more than 200 people all living together all day, sharing toilets and eating areas. There is no respect for anyone. There is no respect for life... There is no social distancing in here. Some people are sharing rooms with strangers. To say we are social distancing is just a joke.”

A Mears spokesperson said Wakefield Labour council’s director of public health inspected the site on April 7 and approved its continued operation.

Last Wednesday, a coronavirus outbreak forced Hillingdon Hospital in West London to close its emergency department and tell 70 workers to self-isolate. The UK has an appalling record on health and social care worker safety. A report released by Amnesty International yesterday finds 540 have died with COVID-19. The figure only includes data from England and Wales (not Scotland and Northern Ireland), but still puts the UK second worst of the 79 countries monitored by Amnesty—behind Russia with 545.

Coming on the back of a series of significant outbreaks in food processing factories, these events make clear that the Conservative government has created the conditions for a widespread resurgence of the virus.

While the average number of daily new infections and fatalities has been declining for several weeks, reflecting the impact of the national lockdown, it has now begun to level off and, by some measures, rise again. These trends will make a mark on hospitalisation and death rates in the coming weeks. Even over the last week, the UK still saw 84 COVID-19 deaths a day on average—higher than any other country in Europe besides Russia.

Recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) data “suggest the percentage testing positive has decreased over time since 27 April, and this downward trend

appears to have now levelled off.” The ZOE COVID-19 symptom tracker app, with close to 4 million users, estimates the number of people with symptoms has begun to increase since July 6. The UK’s three-day rolling average of new cases shows the same trend, according to figures from the European Centre for Disease Control, reported by Our World in Data. Government statistics show the R value has increased from a range of 0.7-0.9, to 0.8-1 nationally, and up to 0.7-1.1 in the South West.

As it stands, Independent SAGE, a group of eminent scientists critical of the government’s handling of the lockdown, estimate between 20,000 and 25,000 new people are being infected each week in England alone—between 3,000 and 3,500 a day.

A leaked government document ranking the 20 currently worst-affected councils in England shows Bradford, Kirklees and Sheffield are all considered in need of “enhanced government support.” Leicester, currently under local lockdown, has 5.7 percent of tests coming back positive (on a seven-day rolling average); Kirklees has 5 percent and Bradford 4.3 percent—Blackburn with Darwen is also relatively high, at 4.9 percent, and listed as an area of “concern” along with five other localities.

If the catastrophe of a renewed surge of the coronavirus is to be averted, workers must arm themselves with the latest scientific and medical knowledge and with a political programme to fight for safe and secure employment. The Labour Party and the trade unions have shown themselves utterly hostile to any such fight. It must be taken up by rank-and-file workplace and neighbourhood committees as part of an international struggle for socialism.



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