

# Millions reject UK government's return to work call as COVID-19 cases escalate

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The Johnson government is intensifying its drive to reopen the economy despite mounting proof of the rising dangers of infection, and in the face of mounting popular opposition.

Its response to the pandemic has been driven from day one by a vicious “herd immunity” policy and indifference to the deaths of tens of thousands.

After the government abandoned all national lockdown measures from July 4, coronavirus infections surged in many densely populated areas. The number of new cases averaged more than 1,000 each day for most of August. In the first week of September increases are officially already edging towards 2,000 a day. Analysis by King’s College London—using data taken from four million app users—shows that this rate has already been reached—an increase from the 1,300 cases per day recorded last week.

Many office workers are refusing to risk their own lives and that of their families by returning to unsafe workplaces. At the beginning of last month, a survey by Morgan Stanley revealed that only 34 percent of UK office workers had returned. In London, that figure dropped to 29 percent. As of this week, that figure had risen to just 37 percent. This compares with the return of over three-quarters of employees in Germany, Italy and Spain, and 84 percent in France.

A survey by academics at Cardiff and Southampton universities reported that 90 percent of respondents would like to continue working from home “in some capacity.” A YouGov poll last week asked whether businesses, whose staff have been working from home, should be encouraging their return to the office. Only 31 percent thought they should.

Last week, Transport for London (TfL) reported a 17.2 percent increase in Tube passengers over the previous week—but this was nearly 30 percent lower

than the same period last year. TfL reported a 22.2 percent increase in bus journeys on the previous week, down 54.3 percent on the same period last year. Figures provided by the private train operating companies reveal that on Tuesday this week there were three million fewer passengers traveling compared to the equivalent day in 2019.

Incensed, the *Daily Mail* led its front-page Wednesday with a photo of children returning to school, alongside a picture below of an almost empty Paddington rail station in London. Its headline read, “As thousands of children return to school, railways, roads and offices stand empty: ‘THEY’RE BACK AT WORK... WHERE’S REST OF UK?’”

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Carolyn Fairbairn, director general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), made clear the drive to reopen schools “is a vital first step to enable parents to go back to work... they must stay open wherever possible.” The result of this criminal policy will itself fuel the increase in infections, with 10.3 million pupils and 1.5 million teachers and school staff returning to the classroom from Tuesday—nearly 18 percent of the entire population of the UK.

By yesterday, outbreaks had been reported in 100 UK schools. There have been 73 outbreaks in Scotland’s schools, which were reopened on August 11 by the Scottish National Party government. In Northern Ireland there have been 15 outbreaks and in Wales one outbreak. Even though schools in England had only been open for two days, by Thursday 5 outbreaks were recorded and by Friday 11 schools reported infections—more than a doubling in a single day.

Many school pupils will use buses and other forms of public transport, with Transport for London already declaring that measures to limit passenger numbers do

not count for school services, which are permitted to be full to capacity.

Many of the new cases of the virus are connected to international travel—like the seven confirmed cases on a tourist flight from Greece to Wales last week. This week, Scotland and Wales demanded that arrivals from Portugal and parts of Greece self-isolate, whereas England and Northern Ireland did not. This is despite Portugal's seven-day infection rate increasing from 15.3 to 23 per 100,000 people—above the threshold of 20 where a quarantine is supposed to be applied.

The Tories and their counterparts in Scotland and Wales have for weeks imposed local lockdowns—described idiotically by Johnson as a “whack a mole” strategy in reference to the arcade game. These were put in place with the government insisting that it would not countenance reverting back to a national lockdown and without the testing and tracing strategy required to combat the virus.

Imposed haphazardly, with contradictory rules, these “lockdowns” have had virtually no impact in stopping the spread of the disease. Lockdowns have been put in place whereby two different households are not allowed to gather in one household, yet the same households can go to the pub together or travel freely to somewhere a few miles away where lockdown rules do not apply, to meet who they please, go to cafes, shop, etc. Residents can also go on holiday abroad so long as they avoid sharing hotel rooms with people they do not live with!

The absurdity of the entire system is seen in the cases of Bolton and Trafford in Greater Manchester. Greater Manchester, comprising a population of nearly three million people in two cities and eight towns, was put under lockdown at the end of July, along with large parts of east Lancashire and West Yorkshire.

On Tuesday night, the populations of Bolton and Trafford (over 430,000 combined) went to bed under conditions of a lockdown. Just hours later lockdown measures in the towns were due to be lifted. But on Wednesday afternoon, Health Secretary Matt Hancock was forced to keep restrictions in place after “reviewing the latest data” showing “infection rates increase more than 3 times in Bolton in under a week, and double in Trafford since the last review.”

After being in a local lockdown for over four weeks, it was revealed Wednesday that Bolton had the highest

infection rate in England, with a rate of 76.5 per 100,000 people in the week ending August 31. In the last seven days, 220 new cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Bolton—a spike of 340 percent from the week beforehand.

The growth in the infection rate could see millions more people—over an even larger area of northern England, with a population affected larger than that of Scotland and Wales—placed under local lockdown.

Large parts of the North East of England, including County Durham including Darlington, Teesside, South Teesside and North Yorkshire have been added to Public Health England's “hotspot” map after an infection rate surge.

One of the country's largest cities, Leeds in West Yorkshire, was this week listed as an “area of concern” and close to lockdown after a surge to 29.4 infections for every 100,000 people. Over 40 cases were identified on Wednesday. Last week, the infection of 20 staff at a distribution depot of the Greggs bakery chain in Leeds forced its closure.

The government is only able to push its pro-big business agenda because of the collusion of the Labour Party and the trade unions. On Wednesday, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer reminded Johnson that as the government prepared to open schools, he sent him “a private and confidential letter offering to help try and move this forward in a way that would ensure consensus and confidence...” before complaining “and I haven't even had a reply.”

Workers must assert their own interests and oppose the homicidal agenda of the ruling class. What is required is the building of rank and file safety committees in every workplace and school, linking the fight for workplace safety with the transformation of society on a socialist basis.



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