

Boris Johnson announces end of national lockdown, prepares surge of COVID-19

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23 November 2020

UK prime minister Boris Johnson revealed yesterday the government's plans for ending its one-month "lockdown" on December 2 and for allowing gatherings over Christmas.

Thousands more will be allowed to die in the coming weeks to secure the corporations' holiday season profits, with a renewed surge of the virus coinciding with the typical peak of the flu season.

From Wednesday next week, all non-essential shops, gyms, hairdressers and other personal care businesses in England will be allowed to reopen, along with places of worship. The "Tier system" will be reintroduced with some modifications. Pubs, restaurants and cafes can now only act as takeaways in areas under Tier 3 restrictions and pubs and restaurants can only reopen fully in Tier 2 areas if they serve "substantial meals". Reduced numbers of spectators will be allowed into indoor and outdoor sporting events.

The so-called "rule of six" will be reinstated, allowing up to six people from different households to meet indoors or outdoors in Tier 1 areas, only outdoors in Tiers 2, and in limited outdoor settings in Tier 3. But even these limited restrictions will be scrapped for a period over Christmas. The *Telegraph* reports that up to four households will be allowed to come together in one home for December 24-28. The paper suggests that restrictions on pubs and restaurants will also be lifted for those five days.

These measures confirm that Johnson is proceeding with its "herd immunity" policy. His partial lockdown was never intended to save lives, but to prevent a politically catastrophic overwhelming of the National Health Service (NHS) this December and provide a pretext for loosening restrictions in the commercially critical Christmas period. Now households will also be allowed to travel across the country and spend multiple nights under one roof.

This is the common policy of the European ruling class, with governments, to a lesser or greater degree, all preparing to wind down minor additional public health measures introduced this autumn. Britain is once again leading the way in this murderous campaign, having taken 20 days longer than the rest of Europe to bring the R (reproduction

rate) of the virus below 1 during the first wave in spring, according to the OECD.

Business interests and their mouthpieces in the media have already taken their cue. The *Daily Mail* cheered yesterday, "Brace for Christmas shopping! The High Street re-opens next week with the end of national lockdown as Boris Johnson draws up plan for family 'bubbles' to gather for Christmas". The *Times* likewise nodded its approval with the headline, "Boris Johnson to ease Covid lockdown with Christmas shopping spree".

Scientists warning of the disastrous impact of these decisions have been sidelined. Andrew Hayward, a professor of infectious disease epidemiology at University College London and a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), told the BBC last week: "My personal view is we're putting far too much emphasis on having a near normal Christmas. We know respiratory infections peak in January, so throwing fuel on the fire over Christmas can only contribute to this.

"We're on the cusp of being able to protect those elderly people who we love through vaccination and it would be tragic to throw that opportunity away and waste the gains we've made during lockdown by trying to return to normality over the holidays."

Hayward stressed he was speaking in a personal capacity. The *Guardian* reported that other SAGE members, who have not spoken out, share this view.

Bristol epidemiologist and Independent SAGE member Dr Gabriel Scally put the situation most sharply, telling ITV, "There is no point in having a very merry Christmas and then burying friends and relations in January and February. We need to think very seriously about Christmas and how we're going to spend it."

Public Health England, on SAGE's advice, have admitted that every one day of relaxed restrictions over Christmas will require five days of tighter restrictions. In other words, even aside from the effects of lifting restrictions next week, the government intends to throw away even whatever minimal impact the current one-month lockdown has, in order to

boost the corporations profits over Christmas.

Increased infection rates over the winter will accelerate an already far-advanced epidemic. The prevalence of coronavirus remains at a dangerously high level. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Coronavirus Infection Survey for November 20, around 730,000 people were infected with the virus in the week up to November 14. Although the rise in the number of new daily infections appears to be falling slightly, roughly 39,000 people were still contracting COVID-19 every day that week.

Nationally, the R rate was still above one. Infection rates among primary and especially secondary school-aged children continue to increase.

As restrictions are lifted and these numbers begin to rise again, renewed strain will be placed on a health service already reeling from the last 10 months. Four out of five intensive care consultants surveyed by the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine report that their unit is stretched by a shortage of doctors and nurses. Sixty percent of intensive care units (ICUs) have nursing vacancies and 40 percent have to close beds weekly due to staff shortages. Fifty-four percent have broken the guideline 1:1 ratio of nurses to patients in ICUs due to a combination of high patient and low staff numbers.

Workers throughout the National Health Service (NHS) report extreme burnout, with thousands indicating their intention to leave the health service.

Barely a trace of this catastrophe makes its way into the corporate media. No reports mention that 13,000 people have already been killed by COVID-19 in the last two months, roughly corresponding with the second wave of the pandemic, according to official figures. The hundreds dying every day are treated as little more than a cost of doing business.

This reflects the unanimity of the ruling class in imposing a “herd immunity” policy. The Labour Party continue to back Johnson to the hilt, with sections outflanking him on the right. Liverpool’s Labour mayor, Joe Anderson, yesterday called for a more widespread reopening of pubs and restaurants.

Workers overwhelmingly oppose this calculated endangering of human life, but Labour and the trade unions are working systematically to prevent this opposition gaining a political voice and leadership. Through their efforts, the political tone is increasingly set by the most right-wing political forces, arguing for an end to virtually all restrictions.

Mark Harper, chair of the 70-strong “Coronavirus Recovery Group” of ferociously anti-lockdown Tory MPs, has already warned Johnson the group may vote against his plans—“Many will hold their judgement on these measures

until we know which areas will go into which tiers...”

Former Tory party leader Iain Duncan Smith was even more bullish, writing in the *Daily Mail* on the morning of the prime minister’s announcement, “the plan to introduce a toughened-up three-tier system to replace it [the national lockdown] does not sound like any meaningful let up in the devastating restrictions the country faces.” Fellow Tory MP Nus Ghani wrote in the *Telegraph*, “We cannot continue to live in this childlike cycle of repeated, damaging lockdowns”, and called for a “different and enduring strategy for living with the virus”.

The *Telegraph*, a leading anti-lockdown voice, accused Johnson in an editorial of working to a “defeatist” timescale and declared that pubs and restaurants “deserve better.” Fraser Nelson, the editor of its *Spectator* magazine, wrote last week, “There will be no Boris reset until he breaks the endless lockdown cycle”, singing the praises of the Swedish government’s herd immunity model.

These are only the most extreme advocates of the policy of mass death already being pursued by all the major parties, in service to corporate profits and the stock market. Workers and young people must intervene on their own independent political platform if a further terrible loss of life this winter is to be prevented. The prospect of a vaccine next year only makes the deaths suffered in the meantime all the more criminal.

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) and its sister parties across Europe call for a general strike to halt the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school agenda. This should prepare for a national lockdown with full financial, educational, medical and social support provided safely for all workers and young people affected. These measures will be funded by reclaiming the billions already handed to the financial and corporate elite and carrying out a massive redistribution of their colossal private fortunes to meet social needs.



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