

UK COVID-19 vaccination programme will not halt pandemic deaths due to end of lockdown

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8 December 2020

The first people in the world were given the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in the UK yesterday. The first person to be inoculated was a 90-year-old grandmother, Margaret Keenan, at her local National Health Service hospital in Coventry.

Pfizer/BioNTechs is not the first vaccine in operation globally, with almost a million people in China already given a vaccine that is still in its testing phase. At least three vaccines in China have been approved for emergency use outside clinical trials. More than 100,000 people have been given the Sputnik V vaccine in Russia.

Boris Johnson's government has ordered 40 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech drug, with the first 800,000 doses arriving last week from Belgium. The government is to roll out the largest vaccination programme in UK history in two phases, with 50 hospitals initially selected. From December 14, it will be also be administered in 1,000 GP-led centres.

The first 10 million doses will be used mainly among older adults in a care home and by care home workers (1,098,000 people). Those aged 80 and over already attending hospital as an outpatient or who are being discharged home after a hospital stay will receive it. Health and social care workers will be also be among the over 5 million people in this second group.

To be immunised each person must receive two doses, three weeks apart. Another week must pass before they are immune, meaning the whole process takes about one month.

Vaccinating the whole of the UK's 66 million population will take months and well into next year. Britain's Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance told *Sky News* Tuesday, "It's going to take quite a long time to make sure everybody in the at-risk groups and all of the groups that are difficult to reach get vaccinated as appropriate... It may be that next winter even with vaccination we need measures like masks in place--we don't know yet how good all the vaccines are going to be at preventing the transmission of the virus."

The first 800,000 doses only cover 400,000 people. Even if the next several million ordered doses arrive this month, as ordered, from manufacturers who are already reporting delays and problems, this only covers a fraction of the population. The next three bands in line to receive the vaccine are all those 75 years of age and over, 70 and over, and 65 and over. Only then are all 2.2 million individuals aged 16-64 with underlying health conditions set to receive the vaccine. They will be followed by all those aged 60 and over.

By that stage all the first 40 million doses ordered by the UK will be used up. This excludes the age bracket 55-60s (4.4 million people) 50-55 (4.6 million) and the rest of the population (41.5 million).

There are also major logistical problems involved in delivery, particularly to remote rural areas, especially as the vaccine must be stored at -94 degrees Fahrenheit (-70 degrees Celsius). It can only be used within 6 hours of dilution before being discarded.

Despite the immense significance for mankind of the availability of the drug--and promising developments with other vaccines coming on stream--its ability to save lives given its 90 to 95 percent effectivity rate against COVID-19, is being undermined by Britain's ruling elite in their drive to keep the economy open and make profits.

The government ended its own limited four-week national lockdown in the UK on December 2—replacing it with another ineffectual "Tier system" allowing tens of millions of people to travel, shop and use pubs, bars and restaurants. This will lead to a massive loss of lives, even as COVID-19 continues to kill hundreds every day.

There is no significant pattern of decline, whether in cases, hospitalisations or deaths, to justify ending the lockdown. Yesterday another 616 died of COVID-19, up 13 on the same day the previous week and a substantial increase on the previous day's 172 fatalities. 12,282 new cases were also recorded.

The national lockdown was ended citing a small decline in cases and deaths due to the very policy being abandoned. The R (Reproduction) rate of the virus fell below 1, but cases and deaths remained high.

Last Thursday, the day the lockdown ended, deaths of people who perished within 28 days of a positive COVID-19 test—the government’s official measure—passed 60,000. The true figure is edging towards 80,000, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) putting the figure at 76,000 deaths where COVID is mentioned on the death certificate and including deaths in recent days.

The government’s murderous decision to abandon any even limitedly effective restrictions for the next months, as well as continuing to keep open workplaces, schools, colleges, and universities, will see this number soar. Given the actions of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government, which endorsed a herd immunity policy as the virus began to spread uncontrollably in the spring, tens of thousands more people will be dead in Britain before the vaccine is available to the wider population.

Ending the national lockdown was accompanied by an announcement that *all shops are allowed to open for 24 hours a day in December and January* to ensure a bumper Christmas and New Year of profits. Travel restrictions will be eased nationally during a five-day Christmas period of December 23—27 and up to three households will be able to meet up.

Johnson could not contain himself in Parliament when the Conservative government was backed by Labour MPs in voting December 1 to end the lockdown, declaring that “everyone in England, including those in tier 3, will be free to leave their homes for any reason. When they do, they will find the shops open for Christmas, the hairdressers open, the nail bars open, and gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools open.”

No guidance has been issued on how to deal with the impact of the virus over the New Year, traditionally a time when masses of people gather together in city centres and in households.

Prominent scientists have warned of what is to come. Professor Gabriel Scally, a public health expert from Bristol University and member of the Independent SAGE group that has criticised aspects of the government’s COVID-19 policy, said bluntly, “It’s no use having a good Christmas if you’re burying friends and relations in the new year.”

Katherine Henderson, president of Royal College of Emergency Medicine, said, “If Covid cases become hospital cases and then sadly go on to become deaths, we will regret a Christmas season that gave granny Covid for Christmas.”

Professor Andrew Hayward, a member of the official Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) told

BBC Radio 4, “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.”

Dr Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, said that every region in the UK should be placed in Tier Three if COVID-19 hospital admissions had any chance of being kept down.

This scientific advice is being ignored. New figures this week showed that London, which was placed in the less restrictive Tier 2 to placate City financiers and big business, had an infection rate of 169.2 cases of coronavirus per 100,000 people during the week ending December 2. Analysis by the *Daily Mail* yesterday reveals that London, with a population of nearly 9 million, “is now recording more cases per day, for its size, than 27 of 61 authorities currently living under Tier Three curbs, including Nottingham, Leeds, Leicestershire, Bristol, Newcastle and Derby.”

The ruling class cannot be allowed to remain in control and carry out its irrational and barbaric decisions. The working class must intervene independently to ensure that lives are saved in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

This demands organised political and industrial opposition to the Johnson government and all the parties of the ruling elite, including Labour and their industrial police force allies in the trade unions. Walkouts and strikes must be organised in every workplace through the formation of a network of independent rank and file safety committees. This perspective demands the building of the Socialist Equality Party, which alongside its sister parties internationally, is leading the struggle against the pandemic.



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