Catastrophe worsens as UK records nearly 100,000 new COVID-19 cases in 48 hours

Robert Stevens
29 December 2020

The number of COVID-19 cases in Britain continues to surge, with a record 53,135 positive tests announced Tuesday. This was on top of the previous record of 41,385 new cases announced Monday, meaning there have been almost 100,000 cases in the first two days of this week.

In the week to December 29, the number of people in hospital with COVID-19 in England alone rose from 18,063 to 21,787. The main area of increase was in London which saw a 44 percent increase from 1,552 COVID patients to 2,237.

Another 414 people were reported dead, taking the number of Covid fatalities as measured by the government to 71,567. The true figure is substantially higher and is approaching 90,000. Yesterday, the statistical associations in England and Wales produced figures showing there had been 87,000 deaths where COVID was mentioned on the death certificate. The figures will rise as Scotland and Northern Ireland have not yet released fatality data for the period between December 24 and 28.

The terrible death toll is the outcome of the homicidal herd immunity policy of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government. Apart from during the national lockdown of a few months' duration, from the end of March, the government has allowed the virus to rip through the population. The new strain circulating in Britain since September is accelerating a catastrophic resurgence of the virus. It is now present on every continent.

Sir Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the National Health Service (NHS), said yesterday, "Now again we are back in the eye of the storm with a second wave of coronavirus sweeping Europe and, indeed, this country."

By Monday, there were more people in hospital in England (20,426) than the 18,974 patients recorded on April 12 at the height of the first wave.

Hospitals are being overwhelmed with a number having to declare emergencies. The situation in London is the most acute. The London Ambulance Service had one of its "busiest ever days" on December 26, with 7,918 calls—up by more than 2,500 on last year. On Sunday, an internal incident was declared at Queen Elizabeth Hospital due to fears of a shortage of oxygen. The hospital was forced to divert patients to other hospitals in the city.

According to a Sky News reporter at Queen's Hospital in Romford, patients were yesterday being treated inside ambulances "because they don't have enough beds left—that's how bad the situation is". The *Daily Mirror* reported, "Some health boards are considering the option of setting up tents outside hospitals to triage patients, as they work in 'major incident mode'."

The surge in infections threatens to overwhelm a vaccine rollout taking place at a snail's pace. At present only 600,000 people have received the vaccine. The delivery of the second required dose, only issued to people among the highest priority, began just yesterday.

A preliminary study of the "estimated transmissibility and severity of the new variant" in England, by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine warns, "In the absence of substantial vaccine roll-out, cases, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths in 2021 may exceed those in 2020."

It states, "The most stringent intervention scenario with tier 4 England-wide and schools closed during January and 2 million individuals vaccinated per week, is the only scenario we considered which reduces peak ICU burden below the levels seen during the first wave."

The government has placed great store on the Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine, which it has ordered 100 million doses of. The virus is set to receive approval for use in Britain soon. But even if this were available, at the current rate of vaccination most people will remain unprotected. Dr Bharat Pankhania, a senior clinical

© World Socialist Web Site

lecturer at the University of Exeter, said, “It will still take about 50 weeks to immunise 50 million people,” requiring a 24-hour-a-day rollout. The UK’s population is 66 million.

After decades of underfunding and “efficiency savings” cuts, the NHS does not have the staff for such an effort. According to NHS hospitals, mental health services and community providers, there is a shortage of 87,000 staff.

In the spring, the government was forced to build seven “Nightingale” field hospitals. Yesterday it was revealed that, lacking the staff to run them, they have largely been stood down. The *Telegraph* reported, “The hospital in London’s EXCEL centre is understood to have been stripped completely, with beds and ventilators removed.”

The crisis has escalated so rapidly that there is speculation that Johnson may have to put much of England under the highest Tier 4 restrictions in the coming days and even implement a yet to be defined “Tier 5” level of restrictions. According to reports, Tier 5 may involve the closure of schools and universities.

But Johnson is being pressured by the most rapacious sections of the ruling elite to oppose any such lockdowns, which will require parents to be at home to look after their children and not in workplaces generating profits for the corporations. The *Daily Mail*’s front page headline screamed yesterday, “Don’t Betray our children.” *The Sun* cited one Tory backbench MP as stating, “The view of most Tory MPs is that schools do need to stay open. It is the health people who are saying ‘oh gosh, the hospitals will be full’. We know that schools being open does increase the R rate. The question is, is that a price we are willing to pay and in my view it should be.”

Johnson has refused to close schools, with the new term to begin next week. He has only agreed to a slight reopening delay for secondary schools, which will still see all pupils back in classrooms for January 18.

Yet again, the government is rejecting scientific guidance from its own advisers. The *Telegraph* reported that the “Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), told the Prime Minister that infections could spiral out of control unless secondary schools were closed until the end of January.”

Reopening is being pushed through on the basis that schools will be safe as children will be tested. This is a lie, especially given the fact that only secondary school pupils will be tested. Millions of primary school children and educators responsible for all age groups will not be tested. To reopen according to the government’s proposed schedule, all secondary schools would require 5.5 million pupils being tested just in the space of a week.

There are no qualified staff available for such an enormous, safety critical task. The government announced Tuesday that 1,500 military “personnel are on standby to support secondary schools and colleges across England to roll out COVID-19 testing to students and staff as the new term begins in January.” Soldiers in the classrooms brings the increasing militarisation of society to a new and dangerous stage.

None of this would be possible without the backing of the Labour Party and the education trade unions, who have only called for a delay in the return to classrooms for two weeks to enable testing to be carried out. In an interview with the *Guardian* , Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), declared, “Our worry is that they won’t make the right decision today and do what they have done all the way through the pandemic, which is to take an ideological line and get schools back before the testing programme can be properly put in place.”

The NEU is refusing to mobilise its more than half a million members to fight the herding back into schools of millions of pupils and staff. The *Guardian* said of Bousted’s position, “While industrial action is not an option, she said the NEU would be strongly advising members that they have a legal right to work in a safe environment.”

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be holding a coordinating meeting on January 3 to plan the action needed to close schools and campuses. To take part e-mail us at sep@socialequality.org.uk. We are holding an online public forum on January 9 at 2pm. We call on all educators, parents, students and pupils to register to participate and distribute the link to this meeting as widely as possible.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site