

UK in third national lockdown as coronavirus surges out of control

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a third national lockdown in England yesterday. He said that people must stay at home for at least six weeks, except to go to workplaces, to buy food or medicines or exercise once a day. All schools, colleges and universities are closed from Tuesday.

The lockdown is not as stringent as that imposed last March, with Johnson insisting that people should go to work if they cannot work at home to keep profits rolling in for the major corporations. Nurseries and early years providers offering 328,000 school-based nursery places for children will remain open. In addition, there are 120,000 children in special educational needs (SEN) schools and all together 270,000 children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) which qualifies for them to be vulnerable and in school. There are tens of thousands of staff who support SEN children. The least likely to be able to follow social distancing measures because of their age are staying in school thereby increasing the risk to staff.

Detailing the horrific consequences of his murderous “herd immunity” agenda, Johnson said, “In England alone, the number of Covid cases in hospitals has increased by almost a third in the last week to almost 27,000. And that number is 40 percent higher than the first peak in April.” On December 29, more than 80,000 people tested positive for Covid across the UK, “a new record,” and “the number of deaths is up by 20 percent over the last week and will sadly rise further”.

The National Health Service (NHS) could no longer cope with the spread of the disease. The “UK’s chief medical officers [of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland] have advised that the country should move to alert level 5, meaning that if action is not taken NHS capacity may be overwhelmed within 21 days,” he said. It was previously at 4 across the UK. The *Guardian* reported that going to level 5 was recommended by the

Joint Biosecurity Centre before receiving the agreement of the chief medical officers.

The scale of deaths in Britain is staggering, with the record for new cases broken almost on a daily basis. On Monday, another 407 deaths to COVID-19 were announced and a record 58,784 new cases. In the 10 days since December 26, 5,205 people have died of COVID-19, with 490,412 new cases of the disease recorded. This represents *18 percent of the total of 2,713,563 cases* since the virus was first detected in the UK just over 11 months ago, on January 31, 2020.

Before Johnson spoke, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced a national lockdown beginning at midnight until the end of January. Laws will require people to stay at home and work from home where possible, with outdoor gatherings cut back allowing people to meet only one person from one other household. Schools will operate via online and remote learning.

The spread of the virus is rocketing in Scotland, with positive cases reaching a record high 2,464 Sunday. The new variant of the virus, first detected in England in September, is responsible for at least 50 percent of cases. Sturgeon said that there was “compelling” evidence the new variant was about 70 percent more infectious, meaning it could force up the *R* (Reproduction) rate of the virus by 0.7. “That increased faster spread is undoubtedly driving the very serious situation we now face... Today’s case numbers—1,905 new cases, with 15% of tests being positive—illustrate the severity and urgency of the situation.”

Wales Health Minister Vaughan Gething said that positive test results in Wales stood at a massive 25 percent.

Parliament, which was due to return from an extended Christmas recess next week after voting through the Brexit deal on December 30, is being recalled Wednesday to debate the new measures—mostly online.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer rushed to back Johnson, continuing his policy of “constructive opposition” to a hated government he has helped prop up since April. “These measures are necessary and we support them,” he tweeted.

London and the south east of England is the epicentre of the pandemic. The *i* newspaper reported Sunday, “More than one in four people being tested for Covid-19 in London is infected with the virus...” The “daily average as at 29 December... shows a test positivity rate of 26.8 per cent, up from 24.3 per cent on the previous day. This figure has risen sharply in a week, from 22 December when the case positivity rate was 15.7 per cent.”

Over Christmas, cases rose in two-thirds of London’s 32 boroughs, with the number of Covid patients in the capital’s hospitals hitting a peak of 5,524 on December 30. The most ever in hospital in London at the height of the first wave, on April 9, was 5,201.

In the greater south east of England (London, South East and East) Covid hospitalisation admissions are 16 percent above the peak in the spring crisis. In the south east of England, there are almost 50 percent more Covid patients in hospitals than during the spring peak.

The average of new cases per 100,000 population across England is 400 per 100,000. In London it reached more than double that rate with a record 902.5 per 100,000 recorded to December 30—up from 817 a week ago. London’s *Evening Standard* reported, “Hardest hit for its size is [the borough of] Barking & Dagenham, with 2,764 new cases in a week, and the highest rate of new cases in London at 1,298 per 100,000 population.”

Johnson is once again belatedly taking limited action because of mounting public opposition. Since imposing the full lockdown in March, which it abandoned in June with lies about the virus being on a “downward slope” to reopen the economy, its partial restrictions and vastly inadequate circuit breaker November lockdown have allowed the rapid spread of the virus and its deadly new variant. Non-essential workplaces have been open for months, and despite warnings by scientists—including the government’s own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—schools, colleges and universities were opened from September.

School are among the main vectors for the spread of the disease, as Johnson acknowledged yesterday. But the government were determined to keep the vast majority of primary schools open nationally this week for the new term so that they could act as holding pens for children while parents go to work. In his speech Johnson was

obliged to excuse the fact that he insisted schools opened earlier that day with the claim that every day in school was “important.”

Despite the government’s diktats, hundreds of primary schools across the UK did not open Monday because staff refused to attend. The *Manchester Evening News* reported of an outbreak of Covid at a local primary school: “The acting headteacher at Holy Family Catholic Primary School, in Seedley, Salford, and another staff member are both said to be ‘seriously unwell in hospital’. A number of other staff also tested positive for the virus, and became ‘very unwell’ over the Christmas break and are ‘too unwell to return to work’”.

In the county of Norfolk more than 130 primaries did not fully open. In the Greater Manchester region, around 50 primary schools did not and 23 were closed in nearby Merseyside. More than 40 schools did not open in the city of Durham, 21 in North Tyneside, 26 in Newcastle, 10 in Reading, and nine in Northumberland.

This was despite the sabotage of the education trade unions, whose main demand—up until the weekend—was that Johnson only delay the reopening of secondary schools to allow for the testing of pupils in that age group. On Monday, even with talk of an impending national lockdown being trailed everywhere, the unions stepped up their collaboration with the government. The National Education Union (NEU) NAHT, NASUWT, GMB, Unison and Unite signed a joint statement co-ordinated by the Trades Union Congress, calling on a prime minister whose government is responsible for the deaths of at least 75,000 people and in reality well over 90,000 and edging towards 100,000, to “sit down with unions to discuss a joint approach to ensuring safe working arrangements in all schools...”



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