

COVID-19 deaths surge amid record new cases as Britain enters lockdown

Robert Stevens
5 January 2021

Another 830 COVID-19 deaths were announced Tuesday, just hours before today's national lockdown in Britain comes into operation. Daily cases hit a record of 60,916—the eighth successive day with over 50,000. In the 11 days since December 26, there were 6,035 Covid deaths and over half a million new cases (551,328).

At a Downing Street press conference yesterday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced to acknowledge that more than 1.1 million people now had the virus in England. Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty revealed that on September 10, due to the previous lockdown, only one in 900 people in England had the virus. By this week, one in 50 have it and one in 30 in London.

Whitty presented a graph showing that infections were temporality stunted by the national “circuit breaker” lockdown between November 5 and December 2. But infections surged after it ended with the government allowing 24-hour shopping and travel everywhere to “Save Christmas”—and the profits of big business.

A new more contagious variant of COVID-19 was first detected in Kent in south-east England in September. The same herd immunity agenda allowed it to spread uncontrollably, with the economy fully reopened along with schools, colleges and universities that became major vectors of spread. The greater south-east area of England (London, South East and East)—covering a population of 15.7 million people, including a labour force of 8.1 million—is now an epicentre of the pandemic. According to the Office for National Statistics, the new variant may already be responsible for 60 percent of all new cases.

Public health services are unable to cope, with Lincoln County Hospital the latest forced to declare a “critical situation”.

The new lockdown coming into effect today falls well short of that imposed in March last year. While instructing people to stay at home for the seven-week duration, much of the economy will remain open with Johnson insisting that people go to work if they cannot work at home. Non-essential retail, hospitality and personal care services will be

closed, but restaurants are able to continue takeaway services and offer deliveries. Pubs can offer a takeaway food service, coffee and soft drinks. Hotels and holiday accommodation can remain open for a small number of guests.

Workers involved in cleaning and building work in other people's houses are allowed to continue. Estate agents are permitted to work and property viewings can still take place.

Criminally, nurseries and early years providers offering 328,000 school-based places for children will remain open. In addition, there are 120,000 children in special educational needs (SEN) schools and a total of 270,000 children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) qualifying them as vulnerable able to stay in school. There are tens of thousands of staff who support SEN children.

In-person tuition at colleges and universities is also able to continue for “practical courses” such as medicine, nursing, social work and education.

In the first lockdown, elite sports competition was ended, including Premier League soccer. The Premier League is being allowed to continue in this lockdown, despite reporting yesterday that 40 players and club staff tested positive for coronavirus over the past week.

With COVID-19 infections out of control and only a small fraction of the population vaccinated, Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove revealed that the lockdown may still be in place during March.

The lockdown is being imposed in the absence of the necessary financial support for workers. According to the Bank of England, an estimated 5.5 million workers will require support under the government's furlough scheme, which is scheduled to run until the end of April. The state covers only 80 percent of pay, up to a ceiling of £2,500 a month.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak has announced further support totalling just £4.6 billion. This will enable around 600,000 retail, hospitality and leisure companies to access one-off “top-up grants” of up to £9,000 per location. A further £594 million “discretionary fund” will be available for councils to

support businesses affected by the restrictions.

According to the Centre for Retail Research, nearly 180,000 retail jobs were lost in the UK in 2020. Even prior to the latest lockdown announcement, it predicted that 200,000 more retail jobs will be at risk this year.

Johnson finally imposed his partial lockdown out of fear of growing mass opposition to the escalating death toll. The decision was taken by the government's "COVID-O" committee, based on advice from the highly secretive Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC). According to a statement by Health Secretary Matt Hancock in July, these two bodies have sidelined the government's crisis committee Cobra and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies in organising the response to the pandemic, meeting "two or three times a week" and then reporting to "Covid-S, which takes the strategic decisions and is chaired by the Prime Minister..."

On Monday, Johnson chaired a COVID-O session as the Joint Biosecurity Centre announced it would for the first time raise the "threat level" over Covid-19 to the highest level 5. In response, the UK's four Chief Medical Officers, including Whitty, issued a statement of agreement with the Joint Biosecurity Centre "in the light of the most recent data..."

The Joint Biosecurity Centre was set up in May at a cost of £9 billion and is modelled on the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre. It is overseen by spy chiefs and led by Clare Gardiner, the head of cyber resilience and strategy at the National Cyber Security Centre, part of UK's spy agency GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters).

Central to the concerns of the spies at JBC was the growing opposition among educators to being forced to work in unsafe schools. Yesterday, Public Health England reported that 26 percent of investigated Covid infection clusters—2,722 out of 10,000—were linked to nurseries, primaries, secondaries and universities in the 12 weeks to the end of December.

The government still intended that all primary schools nationally, except London, would reopen this week, with secondary schools to follow on January 18. The National Education Union (NEU) has worked alongside other education unions for months in collaboration with the government to keep schools open. Prior to the weekend, it was only asking for a two week delay to put a testing regime in place before schools reopened. But on Sunday, the NEU organised a Zoom call to discuss the crisis, which was attended by a massive 400,000 educators. The union said that this was "The biggest political online meeting in UK history," before noting, "The strength of feeling of our members is clear." The sole aim of the NEU bureaucracy was to clamp down on growing militancy among its membership. Joint General secretary Mary Bousted said that

the union was only advising its members not to work in unsafe buildings under relevant health and safety laws, and insisted, "This is emphatically not a strike. The union is not advising you to withdraw your labour. We have not held a ballot. We are not taking industrial action".

The following morning many educators refused to turn up for work with hundreds of schools closed in at least 29 counties, towns and cities.

Just hours later, Johnson announced the national lockdown. As always, he was assured of the backing of the Labour Party with party leader Sir Keir Starmer declaring, "These measures are necessary and we support them."

As was the case in March, it is only due to fear of an explosion of the class struggle that the government carries out even the most minimal measures to contain the virus. The sole aim of the Labour Party and the trade unions is to work alongside Johnson and the employers in preventing such an eruption of opposition.

The Socialist Equality Party has insisted since the start of the pandemic that workers must take the fight against the pandemic and the defence of their jobs and livelihoods into their own hands by building rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade unions.

- All non-essential production must be shut down immediately.

- All schools and universities must be closed to in-person learning with immediate effect.

- All workers must be paid a full salary.

- This must be paid for by seizing the assets and mega-profits of the major corporations and banks.

The fight for this programme demands the political mobilisation of the entire working class in the struggle for socialism, under the leadership of the SEP. We call on all educators, parents and students to attend the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on January 9 at 2pm. Register today to participate and distribute the link to this critical meeting as widely as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact