

Record UK COVID-19 deaths as government plots ending “the last” lockdown

Robert Stevens
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COVID-19 deaths in the UK hit a record of 1,610 on Tuesday and 33,355 new cases. With a seven-day average of 16.7 daily deaths per million people, the UK currently has the worst COVID-19 death rate in the world.

The deaths took the official tally past 90,000—measured as all who have perished within 28 days of a positive test. The true total is substantially higher, with more than 105,000 death certificates mentioning COVID-19.

Since January 1, there have been 17,914 deaths from the virus and nearly 1 million new cases (978,069).

The programme of “herd immunity” has driven the response of the Conservative government to the pandemic, based on the demands of big business that the economy be kept open and profit making not impacted. Over the last year the government was forced to implement three lockdowns under pressure from the working class.

November’s lockdown barely impacted the number of coronavirus patients in hospital. The current lockdown, begun on January 5, is significantly less restrictive than the first in March, despite a new more contagious strain of the virus and worse hospitalisation rates than before. It is due to be reviewed on March 31, with all indications being that the Tories are moving to end what is being described as the “last lockdown”.

This is being justified by citing a vaccination programme with only just over four million people having received the first dose of a required two doses. The population of the UK is over 66 million.

From this week, those aged over 70 are being offered the vaccine, under conditions in which just over half of those aged 80 and half of those in care homes—among the most vulnerable people—have been vaccinated. There are people in their 90s who have not yet received

their first dose. The *Daily Mirror* reported Tuesday that “residents in Folkestone and Hythe in Kent are furious with no-one over 80 in the district having yet received a vaccine, despite having the UK’s worst Covid death rate. The south-eastern seaside area had a fatality toll of 265.5 per 100,000 people last week, Government figures show.”

The *Sunday Times* reported that the government will end lockdown before the population is vaccinated. A government source told the newspaper, “For the first time there are no significant divisions between hawks and doves in the cabinet. Everyone accepted that we need to lock down hard and everyone accepts that we need to open up before everyone is vaccinated.”

On Sunday, Foreign Minister Dominic Raab told *Sky News*, “What we want to do is get out of this national lockdown as soon as possible.” He added, “By early spring, hopefully by March, we’ll be in a position to make those decisions. I think it’s right to say we won’t do it all in one big bang. As we phase out the national lockdown, I think we’ll end up phasing through a (regional) tiered approach.”

The decision has in reality already been made amid dire warnings the pandemic will significantly worsen over the coming weeks. Last Friday, the government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, said that a premature ending of the lockdown would result in more deaths. “This is not the natural peak that’s going to come down on its own, it’s coming down because of the measures that are in place. Take the lid off now and it’s going to boil over for sure and we’re going to end up with a big problem.”

This homicidal policy is to be carried out only weeks after the government calculates that all over-70s will have had the first dose of the vaccine—a pledge that no-one can take at face value—and not the second dose that

strengthens immunity.

In the last days, the right-wing media have stepped up their propaganda to insist that the government fully reopen the economy, including schools, colleges and universities. In an editorial Monday, the *Daily Telegraph*, commented, “Right now we are in the eye of the storm, with shocking numbers being admitted to hospital, but one has to plan for the future, to think of a point at which the effects of the lockdown might begin to rival the threat of the disease itself.”

The National Health Service (NHS) is already unable to cope with a never-ending stream of new patients. On Sunday, NHS England chief executive Sir Simon Stevens told the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show*, “The facts are very clear and I’m not going to sugar-coat them, hospitals are under extreme pressure and staff are under extreme pressure. Since Christmas Day we’ve seen another 15,000 increase in the inpatients in hospitals across England, that’s the equivalent of filling 30 hospitals full of coronavirus patients. Staggeringly, every thirty seconds across England another patient is being admitted to hospital with coronavirus.” He added, “We have got three-quarters more Covid inpatients now than we had in the April peak.”

On Monday, it was revealed that the number of people in hospital with COVID-19 in London was approaching 8,000, with the *Evening Standard* reporting that “hospitals in other parts of the country on standby to take patients if there are no beds left in the capital.”

Stevens revealed that 53,000 National Health Service staff are off work, either because they have the disease or because they are self-isolating.

The “herd immunity” policy of the government was spelled out by Dr Mary Ramsay, the Head of Immunisation at Public Health England, who said last week, “We may need to accept, if the vaccine doesn’t prevent transmission, that we’re going to protect the people who are really vulnerable and going to die and have serious disease, but we allow the disease to circulate in younger people where it’s not causing much harm.”

There is no scientific justification for the government abandoning the lockdown. Ramsay’s comments were opposed by Dr Deepti Gurdasani of Queen Mary University in comments to the *Byline Times*. She described Public Health England’s strategy as “frankly

ridiculous,” and “no different from the focused protection strategy outlined in the Great Barrington Declaration, which has been thoroughly debunked as an ideology not grounded in any scientific evidence.”

Dr Adam Kucharski, a mathematician at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine told the *Times* on Saturday, “We’re talking a lot to colleagues in Brazil, Colombia, Peru”. This was because the pandemic is surging “in areas of high seroprevalence”, i.e, the level of a pathogen in a population, that should have a higher degree of immunity according to the “herd immunity” paradigm, “Which doesn’t really square.”

The *Times* noted, “The new data from South America suggests that modifications are needed. If new variants mean people can get reinfected, even if they show few symptoms the second time, then they can infect those who have so far avoided the pandemic.” Kucharski said, “That means this idea that we have this fixed value of infections and then the epidemic goes away won’t necessarily apply in the same way.” He warned, “A lot of countries in Europe are building immunity through vaccination and, unfortunately, at great cost through natural infection. And if there are variants that could threaten that accumulated immunity, it’s an enormous problem which needs to be taken seriously.”

The working class must oppose all moves to prematurely reopen the economy, which will lead to even greater loss of life. The issue is posed: Who will control society: the capitalist class based on profit, or the working class based on saving lives and fulfilling social need? The public health catastrophe requires the formation of action committees to enforce emergency measures, including the shutdown of nonessential production and the full closure of schools, colleges and universities, to be made possible by providing full income support to workers and small businesses.



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