

UK records over 21,000 deaths and a million new COVID infections in first three weeks of 2021

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Death, infections and hospitalisations due to COVID-19 are surging in Britain. This week the daily death rate record was topped twice in successive days, with 1,610 fatalities on Tuesday and, in a sharp rise, 1,820 on Wednesday. A further 1,290 deaths were announced Thursday, with an eight-year-old child among the latest victims.

A staggering 21,024 people have died in the first three weeks of 2021, with the UK recording the highest death rate on the planet. In the last seven days another 283,388 new infections were recorded, bringing the total this year to more than 1 million (1,054,866).

Hospitalisations reached 39,068 by Monday this week, almost double that at the height of the first wave last year. The number of patients on ventilation stood at 3,947.

Data from National Health Service England published Thursday revealed that one in 10 major hospital trusts had no spare adult critical care beds last week.

The governments daily count of infections does not give an accurate measure of the number of people infected. Imperial College's REACT-1 infection survey is more accurate. In its latest interim findings based on testing 142,900 people between January 6-15, Imperial estimates that 1.58 percent of the population had the virus during early January—up from 0.91 percent in December. This equates to one in 63 or about 900,000 people infected nationally.

The highest level of infections was recorded in London, with 2.8 percent of the population with the disease, up from 1.21 percent in early December. Other estimates suggest up to 5 percent of the capital's nearly 10 million population may have the virus. This week, the London Ambulance Service was fielding 8,500 calls a day—prior to the pandemic it dealt with 5,000 to 6,000 daily. Yesterday, the *Guardian* revealed that “NHS staff are

preparing to transport patients using two London buses that have been converted into makeshift ambulances, in another sign of the strain Covid is putting on the capital's health services.”

Infections continue to surge despite the lockdown imposed by the Tory government on January 5. The lockdown is significantly less restrictive than the first in March, despite a new more contagious strain of the virus and worse hospitalisation rates. The REACT-1 survey found that COVID-19 cases rose by 50 percent between early December and January 15.

The study concludes, “During the initial 10 days of the third COVID-19 lockdown in England in January 2021, prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 was very high with no evidence of decline. Until prevalence in the community is reduced substantially, health services will remain under extreme pressure and the cumulative number of lives lost during this pandemic will continue to increase rapidly.”

During the first wave of the pandemic the government's brutal herd immunity policy led to the deaths of nearly 20,000 of the most vulnerable people living in care homes. COVID-19 deaths in care homes are surging again, doubling in a fortnight in England. The Office for National Statistics recorded 1,260 COVID-19 care home deaths in the two weeks to January 15—almost twice the 661 fatalities two weeks ago. The virus is taking lives in care homes at a staggering rate, accounting for 40 percent of all deaths in care homes in England—up from just over a quarter at the end of December. Only around 50 percent of the UK's 400,000 residents have so far been vaccinated against the virus.

So severe is the rate of infection, that only hours after mooting that a phased reopening of schools in March was being prepared, with schools to be given just two weeks-notice of commencement, the government is being forced

to row back. Thursday's *Financial Times* cited a senior figure close to Prime Minister Boris Johnson who said, "Boris wants this to be the last lockdown, even if it has to go on longer. There has to be a sense of finality to these measures so he appears to be on side with the scientists. He is being cautious."

Johnson is aware that an escalating number of deaths could ignite a social explosion. Later Thursday, a Downing Street spokesman stated that it couldn't be ruled out that a lockdown could last until the summer: "It remains our position that we want to ease restrictions as soon as it is safe to do so, but in order for us to do that we need to see the transmission rates of the virus come down and we need to see the pressure on the NHS reduce."

Johnson is having to adapt to a public mood strongly opposed to ending lockdown, with many demanding it is made more restrictive. An opinion poll for the *Observer* newspaper saw 61 percent in favour of closing nurseries and 51 percent supporting the closure of takeaway coffee shops and cafes. 75 percent of those questioned said that government ministers had responded too slowly to the pandemic.

All of this was entirely foreseeable. On December 17, the Socialist Equality Party (UK) issued a statement, "Stop the UK's winter of death! For emergency action to save lives!"

The article warned, "The coronavirus pandemic in the UK is being allowed to run out of control. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is pursuing a murderous policy which poses an imminent risk to tens of thousands of lives."

Although the government had to scale back its plans to allow the population to travel and mingle without hindrance for five days over Christmas, it encouraged a 24-hour a day shopping spree to "save Christmas", i.e. to save the profits of the corporations.

At that point, 66,000 people had died according to the official government measures, with a more accurate count based on fatalities with COVID-19 recorded on the death certificate nearer 80,000. In the just over four weeks since the SEP statement was published, tens of thousands more have died. By Thursday this week, 94,580 deaths had been recorded according to the governments' measure of a fatality within 28 days of a person testing positive for the virus. The true figure, as recorded by the UK's statistics agencies—including those where COVID was mentioned on the death certificate, together with additional data on fatalities that have occurred in recent days—shows that deaths from the virus have passed 111,000.

The SEP statement cited Dr Claudia Paoloni, president of the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association, who warned that the Christmas plans will see "patients dying needlessly and thousands of critical cases going untreated." Leading public health specialist Professor Gabriel Scally also warned, "There is no point having a very merry Christmas and then burying friends and relations in January and February."

The SEP explained that the fight against the pandemic is not only, or even primarily, a medical issue. It is, above all, a matter of social and political struggle.

The arch criminal and his cabal of herd immunity enthusiasts in Downing Street are responsible for social murder on a vast scale. But this widely hated government could only have sacrificed the lives of over 111,000 people on the altar of profit and on behalf of the oligarchy that rules Britain with the collusion of the opposition Labour Party and their partners in the trade unions.

Under the banner of "national unity", Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer continued the mantra of his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn in offering his "constructive opposition" in a time of crisis. The trade unions' response to the pandemic was to enter talks with the government during the spring lockdown to assist in what the Trades Union Congress described as a "mass return to work". With the union's collusion, schools, colleges and universities were reopened from September becoming major vectors of the virus. This was bound up with the union's suppression of any and all action by workers against the danger of COVID-19.

The SEP warned in its December statement, "The coming weeks and months are critical. The action that workers take now can save tens of thousands of lives. We call on workers and young people to join our party and build a new international, socialist leadership the working class needs."

This call must be taken up urgently by the working class, beginning with the formation of an interconnected network of workplace and neighbourhood committees, independent of the trade unions, to organise this political struggle and by workers and young people taking the decision to join the SEP.



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