

Johnson government warns UK COVID-19 strain more deadly as hospitals buckle under pressure

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Deaths are mounting in Britain amid evidence that the mutation of COVID-19 first detected last September may be more deadly than the original strain.

This weekend saw just short of 2,000 deaths (1,958) and over 63,000 new infections. There are over 4,000 COVID patients in hospital on ventilators, more than in the first wave of the pandemic which saw a high of 3,301 on April 12.

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson told a Downing Street briefing Saturday, “In addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant—the variant that was first identified in London and the south east—may be associated with a higher degree of mortality.”

Johnson spoke after the government’s New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) announced that the B.1.1.7 variant may increase the death rate by 30 to 40 percent. Nervtag evaluated surveys by three university teams and Public Health England.

The increase in mortality could be much larger than suggested by Nervtag. The *Financial Times* reported, “Most scientists who have commented on Nervtag’s assessment believe that the evidence justifies the overall conclusion of higher mortality, though the size of the effect needs to be pinned down. Estimates of the additional risk from B.1.1.7 in the studies considered by Nervtag ranged from 7 per cent to 271 percent.”

Rowland Kao, professor of epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh, observed, “The increase in deaths is a result of more individuals becoming severely infected and hospitalised, rather than more hospitalisations resulting in death.

“As such, it would appear that the new variant is also responsible for the increased, unexpectedly high burdens in hospitals seen especially around London.”

The UK mutation has been detected in 60 countries worldwide and it is just one of several spreading globally.

On Sunday, it was confirmed that the South African mutation of the virus, which has so far been detected in 20 countries, has been identified in 77 cases in Britain.

Scientists remain cautious about how infectious and deadly the new strains are, but there is also uncertainty as to the effectiveness of the new vaccines on the transmission of the disease. Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England, wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* that scientists “do not yet know the impact of the vaccine on transmission”.

Johnson is making warnings about the B.1.1.7 mutation now because he knows the death toll is going to climb and wants to identify the new variant as the sole cause. His aim is to excuse the government’s inaction over the last year, as he and his cabinet focused on reopening the economy and maintaining profits at the expense of lives.

In an article published Saturday, the BBC’s Health and Science correspondent James Gallagher substantiated a basic point made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the more contagious a virus is the more people it can kill: “While people debate the uncertainties though, we already know this variant has the ability to kill more people than the old ones. A virus that spreads faster (this one is 30-70% faster) will infect more people, more quickly, putting a greater strain on hospitals and leading to a sharper spike in deaths. It is why viruses becoming more transmissible can be a bigger problem than ones becoming more deadly.”

To underscore the dangers of the government’s refusal to implement a full lockdown and any serious measures to prevent the spread of the virus, research by the University of Leicester found that 30 percent of coronavirus patients discharged from hospitals in England were readmitted within five months. Of these, almost one in eight die.

This could be confirmation of the severity of what is termed “Long Covid”, or that the same vulnerable people are being re-infected—refuting all the tenets of the “herd immunity” policy of the Johnson government.

Shocking accounts of in-work transmission of the disease have surfaced in recent days, including the infection of 172 ScotRail staff. The most devastating is at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters/call centre in Swansea, Wales, where at least 535 workers have been infected. Many workplaces have been hit by outbreaks, particularly in the meat and food processing industry. But the outbreak at the DVLA is the largest involving a single employer in a localised area.

The DVLA is by far the largest employer in the area. Evidence is emerging that DVLA management implemented policies that have led to uncontrollable spread of the disease among a 6,000 strong workforce.

The *Guardian* reported, “A complaint received by Public Health Wales’s outbreak control team claims DVLA workers were asked to turn off their test-and-trace apps ‘so that their phones do not ping.’ It also says absences relating to Covid have been counted against workers’ sick leave, with anything over 10 days triggering a warning.”

BBC Wales News were told by a worker, speaking anonymously, “that close contacts of people testing positive are not always sent home to self-isolate, social-distancing is not being followed and homeworking is not possible because of ‘archaic’ systems.”

Transmission of the virus within the DVLA has significantly contributed to a surge in cases in the Swansea Bay area. The newspaper noted, “The scale of the outbreak has made people wary of DVLA staff, who sometimes have to catch three or four buses to get into work from across south Wales.”

During the pandemic, more than 26,000 COVID cases and 828 deaths have been recorded in the Swansea Bay area.

The reckless endangering of workers lives, with business, schools, colleges and universities kept open since the end of the spring lockdown, has led to the UK recording the highest COVID-19 death rate in the world in recent weeks.

According to official government figures, which downplay the death toll in every country, the UK has recorded 97,939 deaths. The next highest death toll in continental Europe is Italy with 85,461 deaths. France, whose 65 million population is almost the same as Britain’s, has 73,049 deaths and Spain has 55,441. Germany, whose population is around 17 million larger than the UK’s, has 52,628 deaths.

The death toll in Britain, when including fatalities with COVID-19 noted on the death certificate, stands at more than 114,000. In the last seven days 8,678 have died from COVID, an increase of nearly 11 percent on the previous week.

The Johnson government has been able to oversee such death and destruction only because they are governing in a de facto coalition with the Labour Party and the trade

unions. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer immediately offered the government his backing on taking over the leadership from Jeremy Corbyn in April last year. He declared as the crisis worsened last September, supporting Johnson’s opening of schools, colleges and universities, that he would endorse “whatever measure the government takes” on the pandemic.

What remains of the Labour “left” has collapsed into an irrelevance. This weekend, Corbyn and his allies John McDonnell and Richard Burgon, of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs that counts just 34 members, signed a letter to Conservative Chancellor Rishi Sunak asking him to “take bold measures needed to tackle the tougher strain of the virus. That should mean that all non-essential workers who can’t work from home should be furloughed on full pay.” Burgon declared that what is required is a “proper lockdown” with “proper financial support.”

This plea is directed to a government responsible for the deaths of more than 114,000 people which their own party does nothing to oppose. The Corbynites have not lifted a finger to challenge the Labour right, with Corbyn not even a Labour MP anymore, having had the whip removed by Starmer months ago as part of the anti-Semitism witch-hunt.

As long as the response to the pandemic is dictated by the Downing Street Malthusians and “herd immunity” advocates, many thousands more lives will be lost. To halt the spread of the virus, the working class must intervene, independently of the Labour Party and trade unions, to enforce emergency action. This includes the immediate shutdown of all nonessential production, along with schools and universities, with full income to all workers. This is the programme advanced only by the Socialist Equality Party.



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