

Johnson plans end of UK lockdown, with terrible loss of life

Thomas Scripps
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Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is preparing to end the UK's national lockdown, with the seven-day average daily death toll at over 1,200 and hospitalisations at over 38,000.

More than 29,000 people have died in just the last 28 days. One day after the government announced 100,000 COVID-19 deaths in Britain, Johnson was already announcing plans to sacrifice more lives on the altar of corporate profits.

Speaking to the House of Commons Wednesday, the prime minister announced the government would set out a "roadmap" to lifting public health restrictions in the week beginning February 22. It will "begin opening of schools on Monday 8 March."

This is the date argued for by the Coronavirus Recovery Group (CRG) of 70 rabidly anti-lockdown Tory MPs. Chair of the CRG Mark Harper had threatened prior to Johnson's announcement, "Once the top four risk groups have been vaccinated and fully protected by March 8—assuming the Government hits the February 15 deadline—the Government must start easing the restrictions."

Political debate in Britain is so far to the right that this murderous strategy is being presented as a compromise. According to the *Times*, Johnson overruled Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, who had been pushing for opening schools after half-term, on February 22.

Sir Keir Starmer and the Labour Party support Johnson's agenda. Starmer told Johnson at Prime Minister's Questions Wednesday that he welcomed "any step forward in opening schools", and this "should be a national priority". He advised that the government "use the window" of the February half-term to vaccinate teacher and support staff—as a way of overcoming opposition.

The Tories and the right-wing media are conducting a ferocious propaganda offensive to advance their objectives. They claim, with sickening cynicism, that they are motivated by concern for children's and families' educational and mental wellbeing.

Seventeen Tory MPs have joined campaign group

UsForThem, demanding schools be reopened as soon as possible. They have published statements in the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* lamenting "mental health crises", "safeguarding hazards", "pressures" on parents, the "attainment gap" between rich and poor children and damaged "life chances".

This rotten and dishonest campaign serves two purposes. First, as an effort to divide the working class, setting struggling families forced to stay at home—who the government have done nothing to support—against school workers.

Second, to cover up the real motivation for school reopenings as a necessary step to throwing open the economy in the interests of the super-rich. As Harper explained on Radio 4's *Today* programme Monday, "It seems to us [that] at that point you need to start bringing the economy back to life, and the first thing that needs to be reopened are our schools."

The cost to human life will be terrible. When schools reopened in September, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that one in 1,400 people in England had COVID-19 in the week August 30-September 5. The most recent major study, by Imperial College London and covering the period up to January 22, found that the rate was one in 64, and up to one in 35 in London.

According to the Imperial study, the current lockdown is barely bringing this number down, if at all. The authors estimate the national reproduction number (R number) to be 0.98, with a possible range of 0.92 to 1.04.

The director of the study, Professor Paul Elliott, warned, "We're not seeing the sharp drop in infections that happened under the first lockdown and if infections aren't brought down significantly, hospitals won't be able to cope with the number of people that need critical care."

Scientific studies prove that schools being open significantly increases rates of infection, meaning the pandemic will be pushed into a new period of exponential growth by Johnson's actions, with tens of thousands more deaths.

The government have tried to sweep this fact under the rug

by focussing all discussion on the risks associated with schools on the teacher death rate released by the ONS Monday, which suggests teachers are at less risk of death from COVID-19 than the broader working population.

Even if this claim is accurate, it says nothing about the role schools play in accelerating community transmission. The government's deceitful rhetoric was summed up in Johnson's self-contradictory statement in Parliament, "schools are not unsafe, schools are safe" but "they bring communities together," and "a large number of kids are a considerable vector of transmission."

On another front, the government is pushing the claim that, since 13 million people—the over 70s and care home residents—will be protected by vaccines by March 8, according to official plans, the risks of the pandemic will have evaporated.

No one should expect the government to meet any target it sets itself, least of all for the deployment of vaccines which are increasingly the subject of fierce international competition. But even if these 13 million are vaccinated, this is only one dose and still leaves millions more vulnerable people at risk of severe disease. In recent weeks, roughly 40 percent of people admitted to hospital with COVID have been aged 18-64.

The question of whether the vaccines prevent transmission as well as illness is also unanswered. The government's Scientific and Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) produced a paper in December warning, "If the vaccine has no effect on transmission, then once restrictions are lifted there would be another epidemic wave. Whilst it would be less severe than without vaccination, there would still be very many hospital admissions and deaths."

After being forced into a third lockdown this month—substantially weakened compared to last spring—by the threat of popular opposition, the government is planning a return to its unrestrained herd immunity programme.

Workers recognise the immense dangers they confront. A survey by the *Times Educational Supplement* of over 5,500 school workers found that 75 percent would be "frightened" or "worried" if their schools opened this term.

However, this opposition is being suppressed by the trade unions to prevent it taking organised political form. Following Johnson's announcement, the National Education Union (NEU), NASUWT, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) responded as one to extend a hand to the government.

Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the NEU, said, "We all want schools to open, but like the Prime Minister we want them to open when it is safe to do so... We agree with Boris Johnson that this is a balancing act." Her only

criticism was that Johnson risked creating "false hope" and that his "misplaced optimism" was "pre-empting a decision that will have to be made in mid-February at the very earliest."

Patrick Roach, general secretary of NASUWT, stated that "a clear plan for how schools will be fully reopened whenever the lockdown restrictions are lifted remains a key question which the Government must now work urgently and openly with the profession to address."

ASCL leader Geoff Barton declared his union "very happy and keen to work with the government on the detailed planning for the safe reopening of schools to all pupils."

Paul Whiteman, NAHT general secretary, called on the government to "collaborate with school leaders and their teams to make sure that there is a workable plan for lifting the lockdown."

The fight over the reopening of schools is the front line of an international drive by the ruling class to throw open their economies. Chicago teachers' refusal to return to in-person learning while the pandemic rages shows the sentiments of school workers throughout the world. Earlier this month, it was effective walkouts of school staff which pushed Johnson to finally implement a national lockdown. In Germany, a Network of Action Committees for Safe Education has adopted a statement calling "For a European-wide strike against school reopenings".

To carry forward this struggle, workers must form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to organise joint action with broader sections of the working class and wage a political fight against their governments. This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee for the Fourth International.



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