

Boris Johnson lifts UK COVID-19 restrictions, as scientists warn of “surge of infections and death”

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On Easter Monday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered an address from Downing Street’s new £2.6 million media briefing room, announcing “step two” of his government’s drive to remove all public health measures to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

With worldwide infections and deaths from COVID-19 rising at their fastest rate since the start of the pandemic, Johnson announced, “From Monday 12th April, we will move to Step Two of our roadmap—reopening shops, gyms, zoos, holiday campsites, personal care services like hairdressers and, of course, beer gardens and outdoor hospitality of all kinds.

“And on Monday the 12th I will be going to the pub myself—and cautiously but irreversibly raising a pint of beer to my lips.”

Johnson’s speech epitomised the nationalist idiocy of the British ruling class and its criminal indifference to suffering and death on a mass scale. Faced with a global death toll of 2.75 million people—including one million in Europe, 150,000 of those in Britain—Johnson described his government’s removal of health restrictions as a “roadmap to freedom”, noting in passing, “We still don’t know how strong the vaccine shield will be when cases begin to rise, as I’m afraid that they will.”

As he has done twice in the past with deadly effect, Johnson used the sharp decline in UK infections, hospitalisations and deaths brought about by lockdown to argue for the lifting of all restrictions. But even as he delivered his speech, data from Public Health England showed the rate of COVID-19 cases increasing across many of England’s poorest northern cities and regions. Yesterday’s *Independent* described “fears the areas could become ‘epicentres’ for new surges or variants of the virus... The worst affected areas are Rotherham, with a rate of 170 Covid infections [per 100,000 people], followed by Barnsley, Doncaster, North Lincolnshire, Wakefield, Bradford and Hull.”

Christina Pagel, from University College London, told the *Independent*: “We are seeing the same things we saw last year and in the autumn, none of the fundamentals have changed. These areas will be left behind, that is the risk of the course we

are on.”

None of this will deter the government from its course of ending “the final lockdown”. A “roadmap update” published by the Cabinet Office on Monday outlined plans to lift restrictions further, based on the introduction of “Covid status certification” (described elsewhere as Covid passports) to facilitate non-essential travel and “help towards the return of crowds to mass events and closed settings, from football matches to theatre performances, and the reopening of nightclubs.”

The population is to be used as human guinea pigs, with a series of mass events overseen by the government’s Events Research Programme from April 15: “The programme will be run across a range of venue and activity types, including the World Snooker Championship at the Crucible in Sheffield and the Circus nightclub in Liverpool, with the aim of admitting a crowd of up to 20,000 to Wembley for the FA Cup final on 15 May.”

A Social Distancing Review is in place “exploring whether existing rules, designed to limit virus transmission, could be relaxed in different settings”—i.e., slashing the 1+ metre rule.

Step three of the government’s four-step plan is due on May 17, with the reopening of indoor venues including pubs and restaurants, hotels, cinemas, museums, play centres and group exercise classes, and with indoor sports venues able to admit up to 1,000 spectators. By June 21, the government plans to have “unlocked” completely, lifting all controls on public gatherings, indoors and out.

Johnson, the serial liar, told Monday’s press briefing, “We see nothing in the present data that makes us think that we will have to deviate from that roadmap.”

Flanked by Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England, and Sir Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Adviser, Johnson concealed findings by the government’s own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) that a surge of deaths was “highly likely” following the lifting of restrictions in steps three and four of the government’s roadmap.

On March 31, SAGE’s Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M-O) reported to the government, “It is

highly likely that there will be a further resurgence in hospitalisations and deaths after the later steps of the roadmap.”

The report—based on modelling provided by the University of Warwick, Imperial College London and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine—warns a surge of infections is likely in summer and autumn, and that “scenarios with little transmission reduction after step four, or with pessimistic but plausible vaccine efficacy assumptions, can result in resurgences in hospitalisations of a similar scale to January 2021.”

Britain’s vaccine rollout has been seized on by the Tory government to push through an end to the lockdown, but SP-MMO’s report contradicts the assumptions on which these efforts are based. Modelling by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine suggests the AstraZeneca vaccine might cut the risk of infection nationally by just 31 percent, concluding, “Step four may lead to a larger surge of cases and deaths comparable to that seen during the first wave.” A similarly “pessimistic model” by Imperial College London, suggests that hospital admissions could peak at levels seen earlier this year, based on an assumption that vaccinations halve the risk of infection.

Of the 31.5 million people who have received their first dose of a vaccine, only 5.4 million have received both jabs. SAGE is already warning of a slow-down in vaccine take-up, forecasting a drop to 2.7 million jabs per week until July, with insufficient vaccine available for first doses, “As the dates of second doses for the over-50-year-olds are now largely fixed, this slower scenario has the effect of reducing the proportion of under-50-year-olds who are protected at the time of steps 3 and 4.”

At Monday’s press conference, Whitty alluded to the situation in Chile, where a speedy vaccine rollout has failed to halt spiralling infections, “We want to do things in a steady way because the assumption that just because you vaccinate lots of people, then the problem goes away, I think Chile is quite a good corrective to that.” Twenty percent of Chile’s population has been fully vaccinated, the second highest in the world after Israel, but infections are surging once more, with 5,827 new cases reported yesterday taking Chile’s death toll to 23,677.

Capitalism has created a humanitarian disaster for the working class across the planet. The ruling class policy of “herd immunity”, allowing the virus to spread unchecked, has given rise to new and potentially vaccine-resistant Covid mutations. The UK B117 variant, which is 60 percent more transmissible, is present in 125 countries, including India, where it reportedly accounts for the majority of new infections. India’s National Centre for Disease Control has announced a new variant—a “double mutant”—identified in Maharashtra, Delhi and Punjab, that may inhibit the effects of current vaccines, while simultaneously increasing the virus’s ability to infect its host.

With hospitals across Europe, the Americas and much of Asia buckling beneath the weight of the most serious pandemic in more than a century, Johnson told the media he remains “hopeful” that international travel can “get going” from the earliest possible restart date of May 17.

On display at Monday’s press conference was not simply the criminality of the Tory government, but of the entire capitalist order. Johnson’s Orwellian pronouncements about an “irreversible roadmap to freedom” have been endorsed by every section of the media and political establishment. Whether Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party, the Scottish National Party or the Trades Union Congress, all agree that public health measures must be ended, and the economy reopened, to protect the profits of the corporations, banks and super-rich.

Starmer’s sole criticism of the government has been to align himself with around 70 Tory rebels to reject vaccine passports as “un-British” and a threat to civil liberties. There is a cynical and diversionary character to such posturing. As Director of Public Prosecutions, Starmer played a key role in the state persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and as Labour leader he has backed the most far-reaching assault in decades on the right to protest and assembly, including the government’s repressive Covid regulations.

Starmer, along with members of Labour’s Socialist Campaign Group, including Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott, condemn Covid passports as a form of identity card. But they are silent on the reason they are being proposed—to justify the ending of lockdown and the herding of workers and youth into unsafe workplaces, schools, pubs, clubs, gyms and sporting venues that threatens the lives of tens of thousands.

Only the intervention of the working class, uniting across national boundaries in a global struggle against capitalism, can stop the wave of infection and death from COVID-19. The grip of the financial oligarchy over society’s vast resources, and the division of the world into rival national states—a barrier to scientific planning and cooperation—must be ended. This means the construction of revolutionary leadership in the working class and the development of new organisations of mass struggle, including rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party appeals to workers and young people who agree with this perspective to attend this Saturday’s event being held to discuss the development of a network of rank-and-file action committees for safe workplaces.



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