UK Johnson government takes no new measures against pandemic

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27 December 2021

Britain's government is in full herd immunity mode, taking no further measures yesterday to combat the staggering spread of COVID in England, after supposedly reviewing hospital data.

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson met with his chief medical and scientific advisers to discuss data on the length of stay in hospitals for COVID patients, their transition rates to Intensive Care Units and new daily COVID death figures.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid then ruled out any new COVID restrictions, if any were to be imposed, until the New Year. Johnson confirmed later in a tweet that "there will be no new restrictions introduced in England before the New Year."

The decision was a fait accompli. Johnson is under instruction from his party's most fascistic wing in the COVID Recovery Group (CRG) to ignore numerous warnings that the Omicron variant of the virus is surging out of control, infecting millions and rapidly overwhelming the National Health Service (NHS).

Sky News cited information seen by COVID data expert Tim White on the situation in England's hospitals. As of Sunday, just one month after Omicron was first detected in Britain on November 27, "there were 7,536 COVID patients in English hospitals—up 17.1 percent" week-on-week.

In London, the epicentre of the Omicron spike, there were 2,425 patients with COVID, a rise of 45.5 percent. In the Midlands 1,345 people are in hospital with COVID (up 17 percent), the East of England 681 (up 16 percent), in the North West 945 (up 8 percent) and in Yorkshire/North East 847 (up 3 percent).

Dr Paul Donaldson, general secretary of the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association (HCSA), warned in the *Guardian*, "There is a high probability we are moving too late. We will soon start to see the impact of Christmas. We are holding out hope that hospitalisations are at the lower end of projections. But given the uncertainty we face it would be ludicrous not to take additional precautions."

Nearly 1,000 health workers are being forced off work each day with COVID. The latest figures available, up to December 19, showed that 18,829 NHS staff at acute hospital trusts were absent, up from 12,240 a week earlier. At the Barts NHS Trust in London, COVID absences rocketed from 91 to 338. Dr Claire Harrow, chief of medicine for Scotland's biggest health trust, told the press, "We're experiencing staffing challenges due to COVID-19 and our teams are tired from the relentless pressure being put on them."

Despite this emerging catastrophe, the message from the authorities is "Don't Panic!" Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, representing hospital trusts, declared that COVID admissions to hospitals were "not precipitous" or "going up in an exponential way." It was, in addition, too early to see the impact of intergenerational mixing over the Christmas period and, therefore, hospitals were not "seeing the numbers of older people who've got real respiratory problems, needing critical care, needing very large amounts of oxygen support."

Hopson stands reality on its head. The government has just encouraged possibly the biggest super-spreader event in the entire course of the pandemic by opposing any restrictions on Christmas shopping, socialising and family parties. Millions will have been infected as a result.

December 24 saw the largest daily number of COVID cases ever with 122,186 infected. On Christmas Day, 113,628 cases were reported and 108,893 Boxing Day. Monday saw another 98,515 cases and 143 deaths—a staggering 443,222 in just four days.

These figures will be massive underestimates. Over 12.2 million people have been infected in the UK, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reporting Christmas

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Eve that an estimated 1.7 million people in England had COVID in the week ending December 19. This equated to around one in 35 people, the highest rate since the ONS began conducting its survey in May last year. But it is presently taking around 5 days to order, send in and get the result of a PCR test. Those living in England were unable to book a PCR test at a testing centre on the Government website for two hours on Monday, as none were available.

Lateral flow test results are not recorded nationally at all. But everyone will know of parties cancelled or relatives absent Christmas Day due to COVID infection.

The Omicron variant is hitting all age groups, but particularly the young. In minutes published December 24, the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) warned, "Infections have been concentrated in younger age groups to date; hospitalisation rates will increase as older age groups are infected... a large wave of hospital admissions should be expected." Monday's hospitalisation figures for England revealed that a record 470 children 0-17 years old had been admitted ill with COVID in the previous seven days.

Nothing medical will sway the government from its course. In the run-up to Christmas around a third of Tory MPs voted against Johnson's extraordinarily limited Plan B measures and demanded that no more restriction be put in place. Sunday's *Observer* reported a "hardening" of the mood against all restrictions. One CRG member warned, "In any future leadership contest, we will all remember how they acted this week. We need real, gutsy, freedom-loving Conservatives to rescue us from this madness."

Sir Graham Brady, the leader of the Tory's backbench 1922 Committee wrote in the *Mail on Sunday* that cancelling New Year celebrations "must not happen. Enough is enough." The *Mail* editorialised that by opposing "Christmas-wrecking restrictions to tackle the Omicron surge," Johnson had been "at his bold, freedom-loving best… In the strongest possible terms, this paper urges him: Stick to your guns."

The nominally liberal media plays its own despicable role in minimising the threat posed. An *Observer* story, "Omicron: bleak new year or beginning of the end for the pandemic?" cited Dr Julian Tang, professor of Respiratory Sciences at Leicester University, who began his personal soporific with the words, "*My gut feeling* is that this variant is the first step in a process by which the virus adapts to the human population to produce more benign symptoms," before adding, "*I think* the virus will evolve itself out of the pandemic strain very soon and become milder…" [emphasis added]

The *Guardian* for its part published a Christmas Eve op-ed by Professor Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, insisting that "In spite of Omicron, Britain's schools must remain open."

This demand is made under conditions in which schools have become the main vectors of community transmission. Staff absences due to COVID are already so bad that Robert Halfon MP, the Tory chairman of the education select committee, warned, "I'm concerned that even if the Government says they want to keep schools open, schools will continue to send hundreds of thousands of children home."

There is of course no opposition from the Labour Party and the trade unions to any of this, with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer refusing to endorse even a two-week circuit breaker that many scientists insist is the minimum that must be done and the unions doing nothing except calling for improved sick pay for the infected.

But despite the constant magnifying of anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination sentiment by the media, tens of millions of working people are doing all they can to oppose the herd immunity maniacs in government by mounting what the media has described as a "self-imposed lockdown." This was evident in the collapse in the number of shoppers during the annual Boxing Day (December 26) sales, down by 41 percent overall and by almost half in shopping centres.

Everything depends on that mass sentiment finding conscious political form. As the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted in its Christmas Eve perspective, "For the ruling class, there is no limit on the number of dead that they are willing to accept. The limit will not come from above, but from below: through a mass social and political movement of the working class."

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