

UK National Health Service warns thousands will die due to unaffordable energy bills

Robert Stevens
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Thousands of people will die this autumn and winter in Britain as a result of fuel poverty, in what National Health Service (NHS) bosses warn is a looming “humanitarian crisis”.

Last Friday the NHS Confederation, representing the health service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, said it needed to make an “unprecedented move” and warn of the terrible implications of tens of millions more people being plunged into fuel poverty.

NHS Confederation chief executive Matthew Taylor said, “The country is facing a humanitarian crisis. Many people could face the awful choice between skipping meals to heat their homes and having to live in cold, damp and very unpleasant conditions. This in turn could lead to outbreaks of illness and sickness around the country and widen health inequalities, worsen children’s life chances and leave an indelible scar on local communities.”

The organisation wrote to Conservative Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi ahead of an announcement to be made on August 26 on the new energy price cap, noting “latest estimates suggesting that the cap could go as high as £4,200 by January.”

Introducing the letter, the body raised its concern “that widespread fuel poverty will increase the already high number of annual deaths associated with cold homes estimated at around 10,000 a year.”

The letter states, “Even taking into account the £400 cost-of-living rebate promised by the government,” price rises “will push over two thirds of UK households into fuel poverty, exacerbating health inequalities that were already widened during the pandemic.

“Healthcare leaders warn that rising rates of fuel poverty will be a public health emergency, causing and exacerbating physical and mental illness across the whole population and further straining already stretched health and care services.”

The energy cap figures cited by the NHS Confederation

likely underestimate the catastrophic financial burden being imposed on the working class. According to predictions published Tuesday by consultancy Auxilione, due to expected rising natural gas prices, average yearly energy bills are set to rise to £3,576 from October 1, £5,066 in January 2023 and, in just seven months’ time, £6,552 from April 2023.

Millions of households are already in fuel poverty, but price gouging on this scale will plunge most of the population, especially workers, into dire straits.

In April, 22 million people saw bills shoot up by an average of £693, from £1,277 to £1,971 per year. Prepayment customers, mainly the poorest people, saw an increase of £708 from £1,309 to £2,017. This rise led to 6.32 million households being thrust into fuel poverty. Within weeks, as new bills from October run into many thousands of pounds, tens of millions of people will be unable to afford to cook, turn the heating on, or even wash.

According to research published by the University of York last week, two thirds (65.8 percent) of all UK households will be trapped in fuel poverty by January. This equates to 18 million families, or 45 million people.

In a country with over 14 million already living in crushing poverty, the staggering increases in energy bills alone will wipe out all disposable income for millions and most of if not all the savings of millions more.

The crisis is massively compounded by price surges that set a new record each month. Last week the lower consumer prices index (CPI) measure of inflation reached over 10 percent for the first time in 40 years, while the more accurate retail prices index (RPI) measure shot up to nearly 12.5 percent. This week US financial services group Citi predicted that CPI would hit 18 percent in the first quarter of 2023, and the RPI rate would soar to 21 percent.

This impossible situation is driving sharp increases in

poverty, malnutrition and suicide attempts. At the weekend Karim Brohi, a Trauma and Vascular Surgeon and Director of the London Major Trauma System, tweeted, “Multiple admissions for attempted suicide overnight, again. ‘Jumped because can’t afford to eat’. Again.”

Many people were moved by the shocking case of Kelly Thomson, a single mother of two children who after paying bills was left with just £40 per week to feed herself and her two children. After being signed off from work as the pandemic worsened in December 2020, Kelly was forced to try to survive on rock bottom welfare payments. This led to her being hospitalised for malnutrition twice in the last 18 months. Kelly lost two stone in weight. She needed blood transfusions to bring her iron levels back to normal.

The *Metro* newspaper reported that during this period the “family resorted to lighting their home with candles and relying on neighbours to heat their food.” The mother told the *Metro*, “I’m worried for my health, I’m faint with hunger all the time. In June, my children watched me collapse. I’ve never been so scared in my life and the impact on their mental health must be awful.”

Hundreds of people donated to a Go Fund Me appeal, raising over £8,700 for the family. But those in ruling circles are impervious to any such cries for help, including demands by the NHS that immediate relief must be provided for millions of families.

Ahead of an August 11 meeting between outgoing Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi and the heads of 15 energy companies earlier this month, Downing Street insisted that no emergency measures would be rolled out to prevent mass suffering and death this winter. Johnson, in between topping up his suntan during several holidays abroad, said it would be down to his successor, due to be announced September 5, to make any fiscal decisions.

The energy firm heads, even as they collectively reported surging profits of over £15 billion so far this year, strolled in and out of the meeting refusing to make even minimal concessions on energy prices.

Workers are being made to pay for the billions in military spending Britain has committed for NATO’s proxy war against Russia through the hike in energy prices that has followed. Johnson, speaking from Kiev Wednesday to mark Ukrainian independence day and celebrate the war, declared that UK households would have to “endure the pressure” of rising bills. He was supported by Armed Forces Minister James Heappey, who

said that backing Ukraine’s war against Russia means that a “really expensive winter lies ahead” and has to be borne by working people, “whatever the short-term pain and cost might be”.

The Labour Party is playing a major role in this drive to force workers to bear the brunt of what is in reality “a cost of keeping the corporations in profit crisis” and to pay for the massive ramping up of military spending. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer put forward a plan calling only for a freeze in the current energy cap level of £1,971 a year, an amount already unaffordable for millions of families. This would be paid for by a vast subvention of £29 billion, paid for by the taxpayer, handed over to the energy firms to make up the difference between soaring wholesale costs and what they charge.

Moreover, Labour’s freeze proposal only applies to projected energy cap rises *in October this year and January 2023*, but not from April 2023 when bills could reach £6,500 annually. Labour’s plan even cancels the £400 discount off bills, despite them being over 50 percent higher than last winter, already announced by the Conservative government!

Starmer refused to back calls for the nationalisation of the energy firms, declaring, “If you go down the nationalisation route, then money has to be spent on compensating shareholders.”

Labour would of course never contemplate seizing the assets of the major shareholders. But it will not even consider nationalisation of the “Big Five” energy retail companies—British Gas, E.ON, EDF, Scottish Power and Ovo—with £2.85 billion compensation for shareholders. Doing so might suggest that the holy-of-holies, the “free market”, is being placed under threat and alienate the corporate elite Labour speaks for.



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