Scottish government moves to end lockdown as COVID-19 deaths hit 4,000

By Stephen Alexander
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As of June 7, 4,000 deaths were registered in Scotland where coronavirus has been mentioned on the death certificate.

While weekly deaths related to the virus have fallen well below a peak of 659 deaths between April 20 and April 26, there were 89 COVID-19 deaths—seven percent of all deaths registered globally—in the week ending June 7.

Scotland has the third worst coronavirus death rate in the world: “With 4,000 deaths from a population of 5.454 million people, the rate of coronavirus deaths in Scotland has reached 733 for every million, behind England on 767 and Belgium on 842,” according to the Scotsman newspaper.

Most fatalities have occurred in care homes, where 1,861 residents have died, 47 percent of all COVID-19 fatalities across Scotland. A further 46 percent occurred in hospitals and seven percent in homes and non-institutional settings. Poor working class neighbourhoods have borne the brunt of the pandemic, with the Glasgow and Clyde region suffering an astronomical death rate of 10.8 per 10,000 of population—greater than one in a 1,000 people.

Excess deaths above a five year average, also known as preventable deaths, are far higher and considered a more accurate measure of the pandemic’s death toll—under conditions in which capitalist governments globally have failed to provide any systematic testing of the population. Scotland has recorded 841 excess death per million, according to the Financial Times, just below the UK average, but greater than Wales and Northern Ireland, and 30 times greater than Norway, which has comparable population size and density.

In addition to deaths linked directly to COVID-19, there have been 581 preventable deaths in care homes and a massive 1,821 preventable deaths in individual households. A large proportion of these comprise of people dependent on residential care and home care, who died horrendously of neglect as these services were brought to the point of collapse and medical care was rationed at the expense of the elderly, sick and disabled. There have been more than 400 preventable non-COVID-19 deaths among people with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

Care deaths were exacerbated by the genocidal government policy pursued across the UK of discharging the elderly from hospital to care homes without screening for the virus. At the height of the pandemic, according to research by the National Audit Office, 25,000 people may have been discharged from hospitals into care homes without being tested. In Scotland alone, nearly 1,000 patients were discharged to care homes without being tested, which helped to seed the virus in more than half of all care homes.

This was carried on in the full knowledge that care standards were rapidly deteriorating because of woefully inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and massive staff absences due to uncontrolled infection. Even in normal conditions, many care homes do not directly employ medically trained staff and cannot deliver humane medical treatment or palliative care to the very sick or dying. Nevertheless, only nine percent of COVID-19 fatalities among Scotland’s care home residents occurred in hospitals, according to the International Long Term Care Policy Institute.

Had the Scottish government wanted to intervene to relieve the abject suffering in care there was sufficient hospital capacity to do so, including the 1,000 capacity temporary National Health Service hospital, the NHS Louisa Jordan in Glasgow, which stood completely unused since opening to great fanfare in April. Many other hospital wards stood empty as non-critical health care was suspended.

Scotland’s First Minister and Scottish National Party
SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon claimed that the care admissions policy was the product of the latest scientific thinking. On May 31, Sturgeon said, “Back then, the view was that people who didn’t have symptoms, either because they were pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic didn’t shed the virus.”

This was a lie. The SNP has replicated the fascistic “herd immunity” strategy of Boris Johnson’s Conservative government from the very beginning, prioritising corporate profit over the health and lives of workers and the retired.

Parroting the pseudo-scientific justifications peddled by the Tory party for its barely concealed policy of social euthanasia, Scotland’s national clinical director, Jason Leitch, advocated measures to “manage the infection safely across our whole population,” in an interview with Channel 4 News on March 16. “We have no choice, you can’t get rid of the virus,” he said. This was just four days after Johnson declared at a Downing Street conference, as herd immunity was confirmed as official policy, “I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.”

Despite having months to prepare on the back of repeated emergency warnings issued by the World Health Organisation dating back to January, both Westminster and Holyrood instituted only a belated and partial lockdown, allowing big business to exploit millions of workers in unsafe conditions. Epidemiologists at Edinburgh University, led by Professor Rowland Kao, have estimated that up to 80 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Scotland could have been prevented if the lockdown had been instituted just two weeks earlier.

In the face of widespread scientific evidence, as well as the experience of countries such as China and South Korea, the SNP government rejected the necessity of proactive testing, contact tracing and quarantine protocols. The former chief medical officer, Catherine Calderwood—who stepped down after being caught breaching lockdown rules—denounced criticism over Scotland’s limited testing capacity on April 2, stating, “The thought that in some way testing slows the virus or is a part of our strategy to prevent transmission is a fallacy, I’m afraid.”

To date, only one-third of care home staff, for instance, have been provided with one-off tests. Safe levels of screening, requiring repeated testing at regular intervals, are nowhere in sight.

It was only in April, at the height of the initial outbreak, that the Scottish government bothered to order increased supplies of the substandard PPE prescribed by health authorities. Shortages remain widespread.

As a result of these policies, hospitals have also become hubs of viral transmission, with almost 900 known infections among NHS staff and uncounted dozens of fatalities. According to official figures, there have been 125 separate outbreaks on non-COVID-19 hospital wards resulting in 201 known patient fatalities.

For months the Scottish government and Edinburgh City Council, controlled by an SNP/Labour coalition, withheld information about the first known mass transmission event in Scotland, which took place at a Nike conference in Edinburgh on February 26 and 27. This was attended by 70 employees from around the world. None of the retail and restaurant workers, a tour guide, or those who stayed in same hotel as the international delegation were informed of the outbreak.

The same is true for another case of international transmission, identified in February, involving a passenger on a flight from Italy to Edinburgh.

The SNP is now moving aggressively toward reopening the economy even as the pandemic continues to accelerate globally. Phase three of easing the lockdown will begin next month, with the tourism industry scheduled to reopen on July 15, together with nurseries, offices, shops, gyms, and museums, subject to token social distancing measures. This is informed not by scientific expertise, but rather by the demands of big business to resume extracting profits from the exploitation of workers.

Despite receiving a pandemic bailout totalling hundreds of billions in public money, the corporate and financial elite are utilising the situation to impose mass layoffs. Rolls-Royce, as part of their plans to shed 9,000 jobs globally and 3,000 in Britain, will cut 700 jobs at its Inchinnan site, near Glasgow. Ovo Energy will make 1,400 redundant in England and Wales and 1,000 in Scotland. The Macdonald hotel group is considering 1,800 redundancies, with another 240 jobs in danger at Crieff Hydro hotels.

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