

Johnson government opposes national lockdown despite exponential rise in UK coronavirus cases

By Robert Stevens
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A vast swathe of Britain is now under local lockdowns, as Boris Johnson's government announced Friday that a 10pm curfew would come into operation over the entire North East of England. At least 10 million people are now under local lockdowns in northern England, the Midlands, Scotland and South Wales.

From next Tuesday, this will increase to around 13 million when further restrictions will be introduced across Lancashire, Merseyside, large parts of West Yorkshire and Cheshire. These will include curfews on pubs and restaurants, which will have to close by 10pm, and a ban on socialising outside of households.

The situation in Birmingham, the UK's second largest city, and neighbouring Sandwell and Solihull is under review—with further restrictions being considered as COVID infections increase in the area. Households were banned from mixing in Birmingham and the two other towns from September 15 after the seven-day infection rate rose to more than 70 cases per 100,000 people.

Large populations and conurbations are seeing even higher recorded daily increase of COVID-19 cases than at the height of the pandemic in the spring. On Thursday, Leeds, with a population of nearly 800,000, confirmed a further 117 infections. Its previous largest daily figure was recorded on April 22, when 109 cases were detected.

It is just 77 days since the Johnson government recklessly reopened the economy on July 1, in the middle of a pandemic, to restore the profits of the corporations. From August 11, the UK's more than 20,000 schools began to reopen, with these decisions resulting in a predictable resurgence of the deadly virus.

The *R* (reproduction) number of the virus rose above 1 last week to between 1.0 and 1.2. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) announced yesterday it had gone up again to between 1.1 and 1.4. SAGE said this level equated to a "widespread growth of the epidemic across the country."

In the last week alone, officially recognised cases of COVID-19 have more than doubled—a daily average over the last days of between 3,000–4,000.

Friday saw 4,322 new lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19—an infection every 20 seconds and a rise of nearly 1,000 in 24 hours. Another 27 deaths were announced.

Given that many thousands of people with symptoms, and millions in "hotspots" nationwide, are unable to get tests, even this is an enormous under reporting by the Conservative government.

Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics, reported that an estimated average of 6,000 people per day *in England alone* were infected between September 4 to 10. This was an increase from 3,200 people per day for the period from August 30 to September 5. The Covid Symptom Study app, developed by King's College London and ZOE, a health care data science group, which tracks the health of four million people in the UK, estimates there were around 7,500 new cases of COVID every day over the last two weeks.

On Thursday, Professor Anthony Costello, a former director at the World Health Organisation, who set up, along with other scientists, the Independent SAGE committee to challenge the governments misuse of scientific evidence, tweeted, "I'm hearing from a well-connected person that government now thinks, in absence of testing, there are 38,000 infections per day.

Noting that evidence showed that the virus was spreading widely across all age groups, Yvonne Doyle, the medical director at Public Health England, said yesterday it was "a warning of far worse things to come."

As the number of infections surges, the growth in COVID-19 cases requiring hospital admissions nearly doubled from 100 in the week from September 8, to 194. The government refuses to close-down the economy even as it is planning to reopen several Nightingale hospitals that were originally opened in the spring with National Health

Service units massively under strain. One of the Nightingales based at Birmingham's NEC arena is already on standby to begin treating patients within two to three days.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock admitted to *Sky News* yesterday that "The virus is clearly accelerating across the country," before insisting, "The last line of defence is full national action and I don't want to see that."

What is being proposed instead are half-hearted national "circuit break" measures that would be in operation for just two weeks. This would involve schools and most workplaces staying *open*, while some pubs and restaurants *could* have their opening hours restricted.

To ensure that the mass return of teachers and pupils to school over the last weeks is not reversed, the *Financial Times* reported Thursday, "Experts on the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) and the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (Spi-m) have suggested a national lockdown that could coincide with the October school half-term."

It added, "The government is keen to avoid the reclosure of schools, having shut them during the national lockdown in March and only fully reopening them this autumn."

The article cited a scientist "member of Sage" saying, "As schools will be closed for one week at half-term, adding an extra week to that will have limited impact on education." The half-term does not begin until October 22, by which time the spread of the virus will be catastrophically out of control as it was prior to March's national lockdown.

As of Friday afternoon, 1,230 schools had been hit with coronavirus, an average of more than 32 a day since the August re-openings in Scotland—but with most cases developing in schools in England (933) since September. There are at least 147 schools with multiple infections confirmed across their school population. The *Guardian* reported yesterday that "more than four out of five schools in England have pupils stuck at home because they cannot get access to COVID-19 tests, according to a survey of headteachers."

Johnson said on a visit to Oxfordshire yesterday, "We are now seeing a second wave coming in. We've seen it in France, in Spain, across Europe. It's been absolutely inevitable, I'm afraid, that we would see it in this country." But even as deaths mount in those countries—154 died in France yesterday and 557 in Spain in the previous 72 hours, Johnson insisted his homicidal agenda would continue: "We want to keep the schools open—that's going to happen. And we'll try and keep all parts of the economy open, as far as we possibly can. I don't think anybody wants to go into a second lockdown."

This horrific situation exposes the Tory governments lies,

led by Johnson, who insisted that there was little chance of children being endangered by the virus and hardly any chance they could infect adults. Answering questions from a committee of MPs Wednesday, Johnson was forced to retreat on such lying claims, admitting that it is "a fact of the disease that it is readily transmissible between children and adults. And what we are now seeing is unfortunately the progression of the disease from younger groups, who as everybody knows are much less prone to its worst effects, up into the older groups."

The response of Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, who played a critical role in ensuring the reopening of the economy and schools, was to urge Friday that Johnson convene a meeting of the government's emergency committee Cobra. Fearing mounting public anger, he declared, "I am deeply concerned about the sharp rise in coronavirus cases and the difficulties people across the country are facing getting a test... The British public want to know what the situation is and what the government is going to do about it."

Yet again Starmer insisted that his party would continue to back Johnson's government and not oppose its herd immunity policy, stating, "I want to make clear too that Labour will continue to act in the national interest."

The mass endangering of life underscores the necessity of workers and young people fighting for an alternative perspective. The Socialist Equality Party is providing the only viable opposition to this deadly agenda through the formation of independent rank-and-file safety committees to protect lives. Today the national Educators Rank-and-File Committee is holding its second meeting to oppose the unsafe reopening of UK schools and universities.

Please register here to attend and participate in this critical event.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>