

Overwhelming opposition to reopening of UK schools amid worsening COVID-19 pandemic

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Mass opposition is developing among teachers and parents to the Johnson government's reopening of schools across the UK.

"Our Plan to Rebuild", the UK government's COVID-19 recovery strategy, published Monday, includes the phased return of schools starting with reception, year 1 and year 6 pupils (aged 4 to 5 years, 5 to 6 years and 10 to 11 years respectively) from June 1.

The closure of schools—begun belatedly in the UK on March 23—is a key measure recommended by medical experts internationally to reduce the infection and death rate from the coronavirus pandemic.

On Friday, Education Minister Gavin Williamson issued a statement in the *Daily Mail* calling on teachers to return to work "for the sake of all pupils." Williamson repeated the government's contested claims that "we are now past the peak of the virus," claiming the phased reopening of schools was "based on the latest scientific advice."

But yesterday, the head of the British Medical Association (BMA) Chaand Nagpaul warned, "Until we have got case numbers much lower, we should not consider reopening schools. ... We cannot risk a second spike or take actions which would increase the spread of this virus, particularly as we see sustained rates of infection across the UK."

The World Health Organisation's top official in Europe, Dr Hans Kluge, warned of the risk of a second and more deadly wave of infection caused by the easing of lockdown restrictions. Kluge told the *Telegraph* yesterday, "People think lockdown is finished. Nothing has changed. The full disease control package has to be in place. That's the key message."

The Johnson government's reopening of schools is the spearhead of its homicidal plans to restart the economy on behalf of the financial oligarchy. This

cannot be achieved without transforming schools into little more than child-minding centres so that parents can be herded back into unsafe workplaces.

Yesterday, teacher unions, including the National Education Union (NEU) and National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) met with the government and leading members of its scientific advisory committee, SAGE—including Sir Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, and Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientific adviser.

The talks were billed by the government as a means for unions to "reassure" their members that the phased reopening of schools was in line with scientific advice. But none of the questions posed by the unions were answered, including the impact on the reproduction rate of current measures to ease the lockdown and the role of children in spreading the virus.

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, who has declared schools must reopen on June 1, blurted out the real purpose of yesterday's talks, saying they would be "crucial for building a consensus."

The union's response is duplicitous. Science has already established the immense dangers posed by any reopening of schools. Figures released yesterday by SAGE show the reproduction rate for COVID-19 has risen to a national average of 0.7–1.0. Anything above 1 means the virus will begin to grow exponentially. The latest figures are based on data obtained three weeks ago, i.e., before the Johnson government's easing of lockdown restrictions announced last Sunday.

There is a mass outpouring of opposition to the Johnson government's reopening of schools:

- Nine in 10 teachers oppose the prime minister's plan for primary schools to open from June 1,

according to an NEU poll. Approximately 85 percent of respondents said they disagreed with the plans, while 92 percent said they would not feel safe with the proposed wider opening of schools. Of those with school-age children, 89 percent said they felt it would be “unsafe or very unsafe” to send their children back to school in current circumstances.

- A survey by the GMB union found 96 percent of school support staff are worried that reopening schools too early will put children and their families at risk. Only 0.6 percent of respondents think it’s possible for young school children to socially distance in school. Meanwhile fewer than 12 percent of school support staff are confident adequate coronavirus testing will be available for staff.

- More than 400,000 teachers have signed a petition by the NEU opposing the reopening of schools in the absence of safety measures including extensive testing, contact tracing and quarantine.

- A petition started by parent Lucy Browne demanding the right to keep children at home if schools are reopened has received well over half a million signatures, spiking just hours after Johnson’s television broadcast on Sunday evening.

Yesterday’s announcement by Liverpool Mayor Jim Anderson that schools there will not reopen on June 1 reflects the depth of public sentiment. With new Public Health England figures showing the epicentre of infections has shifted from London to the North West of England and Yorkshire, Gateshead Council in Newcastle yesterday urged residents to ignore the Johnson government’s instructions on easing the lockdown and stay at home.

The push to reopen schools has been coupled with a vicious attack on teachers by Tory and Labour politicians and the media who have denounced calls for safety as “scare-mongering.” Thursday’s *Daily Mail* headline, “Let our teachers be heroes,” caused widespread public anger, with its implication that teachers opposed to ending the lockdown are cowards and traitors.

Yesterday, the BBC promoted the comments of social entrepreneur Steve Chalke from the Oasis Trust, which runs 35 primary schools in England. He described teacher opposition to reopening schools as “rather middle class,” stating, “The greatest risks for many of our children are being stuck in a council block, with no

fresh air, no exercise, little or no nutritious food.”

Teachers are more than aware of these issues. They have spent the last decade fighting Tory austerity measures enforced by Labour-run councils which have created a £5.5 billion shortfall in school budgets and near bankruptcy for thousands of schools. More than 4.1 million children live in poverty—nine in every classroom of 30—with 1.6 million families relying on food banks.

On Thursday, the witch-hunt against teachers was joined by former Labour Education Minister David Blunkett who told BBC Radio 4 that teachers were “working against the interests of children.” His comments were welcomed by the Tory education minister.

Scientists have called for the country to more than halve its current daily infection rate before it is safe to open schools. Office for National Statistics data released this week has shown children were as likely to catch coronavirus as adults.

Azeem Majeed, a professor of primary care at Imperial College London said the data suggests that previous studies, based on hospital admissions, may have underestimated the rates of infection in children.

An Imperial College study found that school closures had reduced the death rate by between 2 and 4 percent, but the impact on peak intensive care unit bed demand is much higher—between 12 and 23 percent.

The science is clear but that is not the basis on which decisions are being taken. The safety and lives of teachers, students and their families mean a political fight against the dictates of a ruthless financial oligarchy which is determined to reopen schools and force a return to work whatever the cost in human life.

Teachers can place no faith in the education unions, which have enforced decades of attacks under both Labour and Conservative governments. Independent rank-and-file committees must be formed in every school to lead decision-making on health and safety and to ensure that the lives of teachers and their students takes precedence over the drive for profit.



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