

# Education unions and Labour councils ready back-door imposition of Johnson government's "back to school" plan

Laura Tiernan  
21 May 2020

Opposition is hardening among teachers and parents toward the Johnson government's "phased" re-opening of nurseries and primary schools, slated for June 1.

On Monday, a poll by the NASUWT trade union of 30,000 teachers found 95 percent opposed schools in England returning from June 1, while 91 percent have no confidence in government measures to protect their health and safety or that of their children.

There is deep public anger over the criminally reckless push to reopen schools—and widespread recognition that the government's campaign has nothing to do with educating or protecting students. Social distancing is impossible to maintain in primary schools and in the case of nursery age children would amount to child abuse.

Last week, it was revealed that Public Health England had neither seen nor approved the government's plans for a phased return of schools announced by Boris Johnson on May 10. The Department for Education's chief scientific adviser, Osama Rahman, has admitted he was only provided with a "draft" guideline for the return of schools *two days after* Johnson's speech was aired.

According to *Schools Week*, during Rahman's appearance in front of the parliamentary science and technology committee, he "also admitted the DfE had done no modelling on the impact on transmission rates of starting to reopen schools after the May half term break."

The decision to send nursery aged children—including babies and toddlers—and primary-aged students as young as 4, 5 and 6 back into schools was taken solely by Johnson and his cabinet of deranged Thatcherites including Jacob Rees-Mogg, Priti Patel and Dominic Raab.

The nakedly pro-market character of the June 1 reopening could hardly be clearer. Seizing on the first signs of a decline in the death rate—achieved only thanks to the public's rigorous adherence to social-distancing and other measures to combat the virus—the Johnson government is pushing working class parents back into factories, offices

and workplaces. It is for this reason that the youngest children, the most difficult to protect, are being forced back first.

The economy is being reopened, despite warnings from the government's scientific advisers that its failure to provide comprehensive mass test, trace and quarantine measures will produce a deadly new wave of infections.

Primary school teacher Piers Roberts, whose step-daughter contracted coronavirus at school before the lockdown and is now fighting for her life, has warned that reopening schools will turn them into "death camps." He slammed the "unconscionable risk" taken by the government for using children as "guinea pigs," describing its return to work measures a "war crime" and "human rights catastrophe."

An urgent warning is necessary: while broad sections of teachers and parents recognise the homicidal content of the Johnson government's return-to-work campaign, the organisations posturing as the political allies of teachers—the education unions and Labour-dominated local authorities—are working to introduce Johnson's plans via the back door.

Since Friday, at least 27 councils, covering thousands of primary schools, have come out against the June 1 reopening date. These include Liverpool, Hartlepool, Gateshead, Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Essex, Slough, and Barking and Dagenham, mostly run by Labour.

Closer scrutiny shows that most are proposing only to delay the reopening of schools by a matter of days. Liverpool and Sefton councils have flagged start dates in mid-June, Stockport plans a phased return from June 10, while Birmingham has stated only that "some schools" may not reopen on June 1.

Bury Council announced that schools in its catchment would not reopen "while high levels of Covid-19 remain." But Andy Burnham, Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, sought to qualify this, telling reporters, "I just think there needs to be a little flexibility offered to councils like Bury to

put in place the local arrangements to reassure parents, teachers and wider community... If that means a week or a couple of weeks beyond June 1, I say so be it.”

On Monday, 20,000 teachers attended an online meeting of the National Education Union (NEU). But the NEU, NASUWT, head teacher association NAHT and the GMB (which covers general staff) are working to derail this opposition in direct collaboration with the Johnson government.

Last night, Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the NEU, posted the following extraordinary statement on Twitter: “We are writing to [Education Secretary] Gavin Williamson today asking him to set up a working party to really examine the practicalities of wider school opening when it is safe to do so. Reopening schools is a question of logistics, not of risks.”

Teachers responded incredulously to Bousted’s statement, “Surely it is both?” one asked.

Bousted’s announcement—contemptuous of the lives of teachers, students and their families—accurately reflects the NEU’s position. In a speech to union reps last Thursday, she described the NEU’s “publicly stated” opposition to a June 1 phased reopening of schools as a “negotiating position.”

She revealed that in the days prior to Johnson’s May 10 speech, NEU officials were already negotiating a phased reopening of schools scheduled to begin with Year 6 students. “We knew that June 1 was a date favoured by the government to start to reopen schools. The indications in our meeting on Thursday, was that the reopening was going to be very cautious, staged, and well managed,” she said.

Bousted and Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney said they were “shocked” by Johnson’s subsequent announcement that three grades would resume. She explained that letters sent to NEU members the day after Johnson’s speech, instructing them not to participate in discussions at their local school, were aimed at forcing the government back to the negotiating table: “The government hasn’t engaged with us nationally... They haven’t engaged with the trade unions, so we’re saying, ‘don’t talk at school level’ to try and force the conversation at national level.”

Anyone who thinks the NEU is trying to protect lives should consider the following words spoken at the reps meeting by Courtney: “The government has not yet answered our questions about what is *the safe rate of transmission* amongst children. Children do transmit” (emphasis added).

Courtney is making clear the NEU’s willingness to subject children to what is being widely described in government, business and media circles as “acceptable levels of risk.”

The NEU is deliberately working to break-up the opposition among teachers and prevent a political struggle to

bring down the Johnson government. This is the real purpose of its “safety checklist” sent to reps, with teachers instructed to oppose their school’s reopening if the NEU’s five safety criteria are not met, the first of which is a “sustained downward trend” in COVID-19 cases. The checklist does not nominate a point at which a reopening would be acceptable, but by their own admission the union was preparing the return of year 6 pupils under conditions where hundreds of people are dying from the virus each day.

What teachers can expect from the NEU in the weeks ahead was blurted out by the union’s legal advisor, who explained that teachers have the right under section 44 of the Workplace Safety Act to refuse to work in conditions that pose a “serious and imminent risk of danger.” “The NEU will support anyone in that position,” the advisor told reps. “But you as reps may well be placed in quite difficult positions when we are finally at a place where we’re looking at the wider opening of schools.”

Should schools fail to act on teachers’ health and safety concerns, Bousted advised, ultimately the matter could be raised “with your local MP.”

Teachers will find no support from their local MPs. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and his deputy, former Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner, both pointedly refused to endorse local councils’ decision to not reopen schools on June 1. On the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* on Sunday, Rayner bent over backwards to demonstrate what she described as Labour’s “constructive” and “cooperative” role in supporting the Johnson government.

So far, NASUWT, NAHT and the ASCL have all announced their support for the staged resumption of classes on June 1. The NEU is preparing to deliver the same outcome as soon as it is politically possible.

The back to school plans are the spearhead of efforts to drag millions of workers into unsafe workplaces, and they can only be fought on the basis of the broadest possible mobilisation against the Johnson government. To wage such a struggle successfully, rank-and-file committees must be formed in every school, uniting teachers, general staff and parents, to oppose the reopening of schools until the virus has been suppressed. Such committees must champion the fundamental principle that the health, safety, lives and social rights of the working class must take precedence over the murderous dictates of the financial oligarchy.



To contact the WWSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wws.org/contact](https://wws.org/contact)**