

No to the reopening of schools! Build action committees to safeguard children and teachers!

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The Socialist Equality Party opposes the Conservative government's plan to reopen primary schools from June 1 in England. We call on teachers, school staff and parents to form action committees to protect the safety and wellbeing of students and staff threatened by the coronavirus pandemic.

The “phased” return of school children, beginning with those in nurseries, reception, year 1 and year 6, is a criminal policy that places children, teachers, families, and communities open to the risk of serious illness and death.

The reopening of schools has nothing to do with genuine concern for the education and wellbeing of children. Teachers, children and even toddlers are being sent into unsafe environments that will become a breeding ground for COVID-19. The youngest and least able to follow safety measures are being packed off to school first as the lynchpin of the government's “back to work” drive. Schools are being treated as little more than holding pens so that millions of parents can be sent to work in non-essential industries.

The inevitable result of the Johnson government's reckless move will be a sharp spike in infections and deaths from the coronavirus.

The first commitment of educators, professionally and morally, is the safeguarding and protection of children. Under normal circumstances, any breach of safeguarding can be used to shut down a school, remove its leadership and dismiss staff. The government is now demanding that thousands of schools breach this duty of care!

Not one of the five key safety measures proclaimed by the government as the precondition for a “safe opening of schools” has been met. Yet Prime Minister Boris Johnson has arrogantly declared that there is no going back on June 1 as the start of a phased reopening. This will be followed just weeks later by the remaining primary school children and year 10 and 12 secondary children. There is nothing “phased” about a return to school in which primary schools could be at full capacity within weeks, with zero additional buildings, classrooms, staff or resources to maintain safe working distances.

The government has failed on the delivery of the very first of its preconditions, “A significant reduction in COVID-19 infections and deaths and extensive arrangements for testing and contact tracing” The “R” (reproduction) rate continues to be between 0.7–1.0. According to University of Oxford researchers, the UK has the highest coronavirus per capita death rate in the world.

Moreover, the government's pledge to have a “track and trace” system up and running by June 1 is in utter shambles, with Johnson forced to admit to not knowing when it will be operational.

The reopening of schools and back-to-work drive signal a full return to the government's murderous “herd immunity” policy of allowing the virus to run unchecked throughout the population. Scientists have warned of a catastrophic impact.

Scientists from the government's own SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) committee warned on Friday that, “COVID-19 is spreading too quickly to lift the lockdown”. This followed statements by scientists from Independent SAGE who said, “We believe that decisions on school opening should be guided by evidence of low levels of COVID-19 infections in the community and the ability to rapidly respond to new infections through a local test, track and isolate strategy. There is no clear evidence that these conditions are met.”

Independent SAGE, made up of scientists concerned at the government's political misuse of scientific research, has predicted an upsurge of cases following the reopening of schools, as has already happened in France, Denmark, and South Korea—a country previously recognised as an exemplar in efforts to contain the virus. Paul Hunter, from the University of East Anglia's medical school, published research which found the closure of educational institutions had “by far the biggest impact” of any lockdown measures across European nations.

There is overwhelming opposition amongst parents, educators and working people to the reopening of schools. Yet this finds no genuine political outlet.

For the past weeks, an alliance of education unions and the Labour Party have worked to systematically demobilise opposition to the government, prevent a coordinated national movement and break resistance down to the level of local authorities, individual schools and even individual parents and teachers.

All the education unions are reporting a growth in membership, with the National Education Union boasting of 20,000 new members and an additional 2,000 reps due to teachers looking for a way to fight back. But the NEU, NASUWT, NAHT and the ASCL all support the staged resumption of classes so that the collective resistance of teachers can be broken down.

Various local authorities are asking only for more time so that

inspections can be carried out safely and social distancing measures implemented. This is a fraud. There is no possibility of proper safety and social distancing in overcrowded, underfunded schools. Within days, even this pose of opposition will be abandoned. Liverpool and Sefton councils, for example, have flagged start dates in mid-June, while Stockport plans a phased return from June 10. Johnson was more than happy to grab hold of this lifeline, accepting that some schools “may not be ready” by June 1, as he sets about creating the facts on the ground for a full reopening of all schools.

Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the NEU, made clear what to expect from the unions, when she described the NEU’s “publicly stated” opposition to a June 1 phased reopening of schools as a “negotiating position.” Bousted revealed that the NEU had sent a letter to the government calling for a working party to “examine the practicalities of wider school opening” and insisting that “Reopening schools is a question of logistics, not of risks.” Now, in response to warnings from four SAGE scientists that the lockdown should not be lifted, the NEU has issued no call for strikes by teachers to oppose Monday’s reopening, but is instead issuing empty and useless appeals to the Johnson government to back down and enter negotiations.

The NEU’s legal adviser sent a letter to teachers explaining their right under section 44 of the Workplace Safety Act to refuse to work in conditions that pose a “serious and imminent risk of danger.” With the government, school management and various local authorities declaring schools to be safe, the unions know this is a recipe for victimisation. The NEU admits that even its own reps will “be placed in quite difficult positions when we are finally at a place where we’re looking at the wider opening of schools.”

Teachers know from bitter experience that they will be left to fend for themselves and that by June 15, left up to the trade unions, the likelihood is that all primary schools will have reopened. These are the same trade unions and councils that have done nothing but betray while teachers have spent the last decade fighting against austerity measures which have led to a more than £5.5 billion shortfall in school budgets, the decimation of state education via academisation and privatisation, an assault on pensions and a five-year pay freeze.

Education workers and parents must now act independently by forming action committees to ensure the safety and well-being of children, staff, families, and communities.

The Socialist Equality Party proposes the following demands as the basis for waging such a fight:

- Schools must remain closed for all pupils to prevent the spread of COVID-19 until scientific advice establishes that it is safe to reopen. Any teacher refusing to work for health reasons, related to themselves or their family, must be provided a full wage and a guarantee against victimisation.

For many thousands of parents being forced to return to work, and for teachers whose schools are reopening, rank-and-file action committees must do everything possible to ensure the maximum safety and wellbeing of children under the dangerous conditions they face:

- Adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) must be

provided, regular deep cleaning carried out and all activities risk-assessed to protect staff and children from cross infection, and maintain social distancing. Staff must be involved in the drawing up of these measures through elected representatives.

- All cases of COVID-19 must be immediately reported to staff and families and affected schools closed until testing and contact tracing establishes that it is safe to reopen.

- All vulnerable staff must have the right not to return to work without any loss of pay or reprisals through the disciplinary system.

- Casual staff who have been unable to work and have not received any income throughout the lockdown must be provided with full back pay. They must be defended against demands from schools to cover those who refuse to work in unsafe conditions.

- Free and high-quality computer and internet access must be guaranteed to every family, to ensure that accessibility to online learning is not dependent on wealth. Any household without internet access or an individual computer for each student in the home must be provided with these basic rights without charge.

- A massive increase in government funding must be advanced to overcome the gutting of educational services and to counter the devastating impact on educational achievement and mental and social wellbeing of children by the pandemic and school closures. This must include increased funding for one-to-one support for those who are falling behind, additional teachers to reduce class sizes, tuition support, psychological and other therapies for pupils.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed and brought to the fore all that is rotten in capitalist society and revealed the vast social inequality that exists. The claim that teachers are not concerned about disadvantaged children is a vile slander. Child poverty was at 4.1 million, that is nine in every classroom of 30, before the pandemic and is projected to rise to well over 5 million. The spread of mental health issues, now impacting on one in eight children, is worsening every day. The growth of food banks, on which 1.6 million relied in 2018–2019, has escalated dramatically.

The SEP insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to a struggle of workers against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is a fight against capitalism and for socialism, i.e., the complete reorganisation of society based on social need, not private profit. We urge all educators to study our programme and contact the SEP if you want any assistance in implementing these policies in your workplace.



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