

# Opposition builds to re-opening of UK schools

Tania Kent  
5 June 2020

The Johnson Conservative government's push to partially reopen schools from June 1 for children in nursery, Foundation Stage, Year 1 and Year 6 has been dealt a blow after hundreds of thousands of parents kept their children at home.

A survey by the National Education Union (NEU) found that more than two in five schools (44 percent) decided against admitting more pupils Monday.

According to figures obtained by the *Guardian*, up to 90 percent of primary schools in some areas are remaining closed to more pupils amid rising fears about the spread of coronavirus.

In large parts of the northeast of England, not a single primary school opened to more pupils on the government's target date for reopening. Data from 11 of the 12 largest local authorities in the region—which has the highest COVID-19 infection rate in the UK—showed just 12 percent of the 856 primary schools admitted additional pupils Monday.

The *Guardian* reported, “In County Durham, Gateshead and Hartlepool, not a single primary school out of 309 reopened to more pupils. ... In Newcastle, officials said only two of its 73 primary schools might be able to admit more pupils before next week.”

In the northwest of England, the proportion of schools opening to more pupils was even lower, at just 8 percent, according to the NEU.

The reopening of schools has nothing to do with genuine concern by the government for the education and well-being of children. Educators and children are being sent into unsafe environments as part of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's “back to work” drive to boost profits for the rich.

The conditions for the children who have been forced to return are distressing, according to accounts from many staff. The measures have transformed schools into holding pens—a precondition for returning the parents of the children to work.

There is growing anxiety and high levels of stress as educators desperately attempt to maintain social distancing. There is also increasing anger, revealed in social media and comments sent to the *World Socialist Web Site*, directed at the teaching unions for not acting to protect their members.

In response to a Zoom webinar held by the NEU on Wednesday—two days after the re-opening of schools—many on Facebook expressed hostility to the inaction of the union. Questions repeatedly posted included, “What are you doing about it?” and “What have you done about it?”

One member, Haider, commented, “What a useless union. Can we get a refund on our union fees we've paid in over the years? All that money to pay a lion with no teeth for protection of pupils before next week.”

Leanne raised, “Okay so I want to know when will they ballot to strike? Stop the talking it's getting us nowhere. Let's get the action going for god's sake!”

Janice said, “It's definitely not safe ... I thought the union was going to try and stop schools opening on Monday but no!”

Others noted the attack on their working conditions and the levels of stress being imposed. Kathy said, “Well that's not exactly helpful for those of us already back in classrooms. I have really tried to be supportive & encouraging of Union engagement in this but kinda a bit late for us heading into early years or Year 6 groups THIS WEEK. And school leaders are taking the brunt of the burden on who should be back & when for both pupils & more crucially staff—ridiculously stressful.”

Rebecca commented, “My school have been back two days already—all doing longer hours as school opening earlier and finishing later, now have no PPA [planning, preparation and assessment] time and have 10 mins break in the morning and 15 mins for lunch! (If they are lucky!) Would like to know what the union is

going to do about the working conditions of its members?”

Mary, a teaching assistant in a primary school in the southeast sent comments to the WSWS on the conditions facing children and staff on reopening. Her school has only extended attendance to Year 6 pupils and only 30 of those have attended.

“Children are split into ‘bubble’ groups and contained in the same classroom. The desks are spread out with equipment packs per child, no sharing is allowed. Hand gel is provided at every entrance and on each desk to be used after each activity. Children are not to leave their desks for any reason other than to go to the toilet.

“Each class has a designated play area that they have to stick to. Teachers cannot leave their bubble and must stay with the children during break times. During wet weather, the children have to remain at their desks for playtimes.

A compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis, available in epub and print formats.

“Windows and doors have to be kept open at all times. This is very problematic when it is raining, like yesterday with heavy showers. Desks must also be cleaned during break times. Door handles must be disinfected throughout the day.

“During playtimes, however, social distancing goes out the window, as children naturally want to be together and play with each other.”

Alan, a secondary teacher who has worked through the lockdown to support key workers and vulnerable children, told the WSWS, “The past 10 weeks have been extremely stressful for all staff from the headteacher to each TA [teaching assistant].

“The constant changes to advice and expectations have left heads having to draft and redraft plans to ensure the safety of their staff and the pupils with stretched budgets. Tape has been put on the floor in front of the canteen to ensure the pupils keep two metres away. This is just to show that there is something being done to follow the government’s advice.

“In the staff room, tape has been put around chairs to ensure that staff keep two metres apart. Seeing pupils sit in the canteen with taped crosses showing where they can sit has been heart-breaking.”

The Socialist Equality Party warned that the role of the education unions and Labour politicians is to systematically demobilise opposition to the government and prevent a coordinated national movement and break resistance down to the level of local authorities, individual schools and even individual parents and teachers.

In our statement, “No to the reopening of schools! Build action committees to safeguard children and teachers!” we explained: “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.”

Opposition to reopening of schools can and must be the spearhead of an independent movement of the working class against the Johnson government and its murderous back-to-work campaign. We urge educators to study our statement below and contact the SEP for advice and assistance in setting up action committees in your school.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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