

UK: Setback for Johnson's school reopening plan due to popular opposition

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Britain's Conservative government has been forced to drop its plans to have all primary children back in school within the next four weeks. It also conceded that there would be no further openings for secondary schools until September "at the earliest".

The retreat is a credit to the millions of parents and educators who opposed the government and acted in defiance of the trade unions. However, the retreat is only temporary. The government's "back to work" agenda will continue to force children and educators back into unsafe classrooms.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson made the announcement in parliament yesterday. He did not offer much in the way of explanation, other than to claim that it was always the government's plan to move "with caution" and "when the time is right".

This is a lie. There was overwhelming evidence from the government's own scientific advisors that it was not safe to open schools on June 1, but it continued with its plans. Primary schools were opened to nursery, reception, year 1 and year 6 children from June 1 to join children of key worker and most vulnerable for whom schools have remained open. Over 2 million additional children were due to be in school. However, more than a million children were kept at home by worried parents, fearing an explosion in COVID-19 cases that will spread throughout the population.

In some areas up to 90 percent of primary schools remained closed to more pupils amid rising fears about the spread of coronavirus. In large working class cities, where infection rates are up to seven times higher than parts of the south—such as the north-east of England—not a single primary school opened to more pupils. In the north-west, just 8 percent of schools opened to more pupils, according to the National Education Union (NEU). The "R" (reproduction) rate is

above 1 in many parts of the north-west, confirming the threat of an explosion of the virus.

The government's obscene claims that the reopening of schools was driven by the concerns over the impact on children suffering from disadvantage and inequality—which the government has overseen—were also exposed in the briefing. Williamson confirmed that free school meals vouchers will not be provided over the summer break to the millions who rely on them already, and the millions whose parents will be made unemployed due to the pandemic. He admitted that the government's plan to provide 700,000 laptops and internet access to families from disadvantaged backgrounds is a pipe dream. Some 100,000 laptops are being "prepared" to go out this week and a further 230,000 by the end of the month, whereas 700,000 are needed.

Williamson stressed that he is calling on schools to continue to open more broadly to those groups already invited back and for families who will need childcare as wider sections of industry begin to open from next week. Management of this drive has been handed over to head teachers and governors, who will be under increasing pressure as millions return to work.

There are no central statistics of the number of educators infected by COVID-19 or the number of schools which have been forced to close due to outbreaks. Sporadic reports from local newspapers reveal that some schools have been forced to shut—10 schools in Lincolnshire and at least one each in Bradford, Sheffield, Doncaster and Derby. A primary school in Pennington in the New Forest was closed yesterday after a pupil was reported as infected.

While the trade unions and some sections of the Labour Party are claiming victory for the retreat, nothing can be further from the truth. Party leader Sir

Keir Starmer wrote a letter to Johnson, revealed last week in parliament, stating that Labour “fully support[s] the wider opening of schools as soon as is feasibly possible,” but was concerned “that without a stronger consensus of professionals and parents behind the wider opening of schools, some parents will choose not to comply and the issue will become even more socially divisive.” He called on the government to “explore how that consensus can be achieved in the shortest possible timeframe.”

The unions, notably the NEU, the largest and ostensibly most “left-wing”, have been denounced by many of their members for refusing to call industrial action to oppose the unsafe conditions in which teachers have been placed by insisting it was up to individuals to challenge risk assessments. The NEU openly advocated the opening of schools from June 15, as did most local authorities, on the grounds that it “will be safer by then.” The key issues in reopening schools, according to NEU joint General Secretary Mary Bousted, were ones of “logistics, not of risk.”

An NEU press release said, “It has taken the government some time to recognise what was obvious to most. The government’s social distancing rules made it impossible for primary schools to admit all pupils before the summer holidays.”

Paul Whiteman, of the National Association of Head Teachers, said “We’re pleased to see the government will not force the impossible” and that the plan had too many “practical barriers”.

The unions insist that they are the only ones who can be trusted to oversee the imposition of the government’s policy. They demand that the government not just “politely listen” to their advice, but also incorporate them into a national task force to police the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party has outlined the only viable perspective to defend the lives and social interests of the working class. We say:

Opposition to the 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. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of action committees, independent from the trade unions, to safeguard the health of children, teachers and the entire working class. We propose that teachers and parents

take up the following demands:

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

* Within schools that are open, 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.

* All cases of COVID-19 must be immediately reported to staff and families and affected schools closed.

* A massive increase in government funding must be advanced, paid for by taxing the super-rich and major corporations, to overcome the gutting of educational services and the devastating impact on educational achievement and mental and social wellbeing of children of the pandemic and school closures.

Teachers and other educators should contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss organising this political fightback.



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