

UK: Marcus Rashford campaign forces Johnson government climbdown over summer free school meals

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18 June 2020

The Conservative government of Boris Johnson was forced to announce an extension of funding for free school meals (FSM) to 1.3 million children over the summer holidays on Tuesday.

The announcement in parliament followed a public campaign by 22-year-old Manchester United and England footballer Marcus Rashford. The new £120 million “Covid summer food fund” for pupils in England will be implemented at the end of the school term.

Johnson announced a partial climbdown over plans for the wider reopening of schools last week, after many parents refused to send their children into unsafe conditions. But he still refused to extent the meal voucher system over the summer break.

As usual, there was no opposition expressed or mobilised against this by the Labour Party or the trade unions.

Angered, Rashford wrote an impassioned open letter to “all MPs in parliament,” which was widely publicised and retweeted over 150,000 times in a two-day period.

His letter exposed the government’s claim that “we are all in this together” by revealing the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the poorest sections of workers.

Rashford cited his own experience as a child. “As a family, we relied on breakfast clubs, free school meals, and the kind actions of neighbours and coaches. Food banks and soup kitchens were not alien to us; I recall very clearly our visits to Northern Moor to collect our Christmas dinners every year. It’s only now that I really understand the enormous sacrifice my mum made in sending me away to live in digs aged 11, a decision no mother would ever make lightly,” his letter stated.

“Wembley stadium could be filled more than twice with children who have had to skip meals during lockdown due

to their families not being able to access food. ... As their stomachs grumble, I wonder if those 200,000 children will ever be proud enough of their country to pull on the England national team shirt one day and sing the national anthem from the stands.”

His letter continued, “This is a system failure and without education we’re encouraging this cycle of hardship to continue. To put this pandemic into perspective, from 2018-2019, nine out of 30 children in any given classroom were living in poverty in the UK. This figure is expected to rise by an additional one million by 2022. In England today, 45 percent of children in black and minority ethnic groups are now in poverty. This is England in 2020.”

The sentiments and experiences outlined by Rashford resonated with millions of families. That it took a footballer and not a Labour politician or trade union leader to place the interests of 1.3 million hungry children on the parliamentary agenda confirms the rottenness of what remains of the so-called “labour movement.” These are bureaucracies whose sole purpose is to safeguard the interests of the major corporations and the financial oligarchy from any threat that might emerge from below. Representing the more highly privileged layers of the upper middle class, with their six-figure salaries and expenses, they are insulated from and indifferent to the grotesque poverty blighting the lives of millions of children and their families.

All the government’s “U-turns”—on school re-openings, the removal of the health care surcharge for non-European Union NHS workers, and now school meal vouchers—have been made after popular campaigns by the public, including parents, educators and NHS staff, acting outside of the structures of the trade unions and, to the extent they function any more, Labour Party branches.

Indeed, the broadly leftward sentiments in society find expression only in direct opposition to the political alliance of the Tories, Labour, and trade unions that have done nothing to safeguard the millions being forced to return to work or in defence of hundreds and thousands who have lost their jobs.

Rashford's campaign forced a collective damage limitations exercise. On Tuesday, an opposition debate was due in parliament with a handful of Tory ministers stating that they would oppose Johnson's refusal to extend FSM vouchers.

Labour, ever ready to seize an opportunity for cross party alliances and exposed by Rashford's campaign, reached out to the Tory "rebels." Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey, until recently held out as the inheritor of the political mantle of Jeremy Corbyn, speaking before the government U-turn, told *BBC Breakfast*, "There will be many Conservative MPs today watching this and having read Marcus's letter who will be agonising about whether they support the government or not in this because they will want what's best for children.

"So, I'm asking all politicians, whatever party they're in, this is not about party politics, this is about making sure children don't go hungry over the summer holidays."

Long-Bailey desperately wants an alliance with a handful of Tories and to insist that concern for children is above "party politics" to suppress rising opposition to Johnson's government, while Labour seeks to build a "national unity" coalition. Just days before, the most recent Opinium survey revealed a new low of just 3 in 10 people registering support for the government's COVID-19 measures, giving the government an overall approval rating of -18.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, unable to reference any role played by his party, could only thank Rashford's efforts in raising the plight of the poor. He went on to declare that Johnson's U-turn on the matter was a "diversion" from addressing the 20 percent collapse in the UK economy, and, somewhat ritualistically, his government's handling of the pandemic crisis.

For his part, Johnson denied having previously heard of Rashford's campaign, saying in a press conference, "I talked to Marcus Rashford today and congratulated him on his campaign, which, to be honest, I only became aware of very recently, today—and I thank him for what he's done."

Whatever tactical adaptations Johnson might make, there will be no let-up in the ongoing offensive against the

working class. Even the miserly investment of £120 million into the school meal voucher scheme may well come from funds already earmarked for food relief. The Tory chair of the education select committee Robert Halfon, one of the "rebels" who urged the government to change course, noted, "There are lots of food programmes across different government departments. If they just consolidated those programmes, they would almost have the money for the free school meals programme over the summer, which would cost roughly £110 million."

The reversal over the FSM scheme extension provides only a short-term lifeline for some of the poorest families. The number of people facing food insecurity in Britain has quadrupled under the COVID-19 lockdown, with 8.1 million people (16 percent of the population) believed to be facing food insecurity. Helen Barnard, acting director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, commented, "Extending the voucher scheme into the summer will help ensure that we don't see the hardship children are facing get worse in the summer holidays, but it only covers a minority of children in poverty and the pressures are much wider than just school meals."

This widening social gap is the result of 12 years of austerity imposed by the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Labour. The only viable answer is the independent political mobilisation of workers and youth in a struggle against capitalism. To wage such a fight, the Socialist Equality Party has called for the formation of action committees of workers, including teachers—that are independent of the trade unions—to formulate policies to ensure safety at work and in the broader communities, and to protect the jobs, wages and essential services now under relentless attack by big business and its parties.



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