

UK: For a general strike against the reopening of schools

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on all education workers to mobilise against the Johnson government's plan to open schools in September despite the threat to health and lives. This homicidal policy can only be challenged through an independent mobilisation, uniting workers in education with all sections of the working class in a general strike movement against the ruling elite.

The government was forced to shut schools in England from March 23, following an outpouring of opposition from teachers and parents. It attempted to reopen them from June 1, to all primary school aged children and Year 12s in secondary schools. This was a disaster for the government, as hundreds of thousands of parents refused to risk the lives of their children or communities during the pandemic, leaving many schools deserted or shut.

The government cannot risk another such debacle. The reopening of schools is the lynchpin of its "back to work" drive to reopen the economy and restore the flow of profits to the corporations and banks. Boris Johnson insists that the reopening is "non-negotiable," setting the stage for a head-on confrontation with education workers and parents.

A lie machine manned by government ministers and supported by a pliant right-wing media is in overdrive, trying to bully, intimidate and block the broad-based opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools. Time and again parents are told that the risk of infection among children is small, that they do not become ill and that schools are not a major vector for wider community transmission.

The evidence proves otherwise. A modelling study published in the *Lancet* warned that the UK's testing and tracing for coronavirus is inadequate to prevent a "rebound" of the epidemic once schools are reopened next month and that this is "likely to induce a second wave that would peak in December 2020." The study warned that infections could reach two-and-a-half times

the rate seen at the height of the pandemic. Professor Neil Ferguson, who resigned from the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said the R value, or "effective reproduction number" of COVID-19 could increase by as much as half when secondary schools reopen and "lead to quite rapid growth of the epidemic."

A few weeks before schools are scheduled to reopen, infection rates are already rising again, following the winding up of the national lockdown. Several predominately working-class cities in the north and south, encompassing over 5 million workers, are in regional lockdowns. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), 4,200 people are being infected with coronavirus every day, up from 3,200 the week before and 2,500 the week before that. Millions are now returning from holidays abroad and "staycations" across the UK, encouraged by the government.

The government's response has been to make clear its determination to reopen the economy no matter what the cost to the population. Simon Clarke, minister for local government, told Sky News, "One thing is clear, schools are going to reopen in full in the autumn, that is not up for debate." Schools Minister Anne Longfield declared that even if future lockdowns become necessary, schools should be "first to open, last to close" and that children "rarely get the virus."

This too is a lie. Israel was one of the first countries to reopen schools in May. Within a month, authorities were forced to shut around 100 schools, ordering thousands of pupils and teachers into quarantine, including 153 students and 25 staff infected at a single school.

In the US, tens of thousands of children and thousands of education workers have been infected with the virus. In Florida alone, almost 40,000 children have been infected and two teenagers have died from the virus. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that COVID-19 may be more easily transmitted than

previously thought and that children are just as likely to be infected as adults and might play an important role in community transmission.

Government ministers and right-wing media hacks respond to all scientific warnings by expressing concern that school closures do far greater damage to the prospects of children, above all the most socially deprived. This is sickening hypocrisy, coming from a government that has done its level best to destroy the education system and to ensure that working class children are born into poverty, live lives of terrible hardship, and then die in poverty.

Their crocodile tears are shed in order to transform schools into holding pens so that their parents can be driven back to work in unsafe conditions. The price will also be paid by education workers and children, whose surroundings will be just as dangerous as they are on public transport, and in factories, offices and shops. There will be no social distancing and no personal protective equipment (PPE), with primary school classes of 30, “bubbles” of 240 in secondary schools, no school closures if there is an outbreak, and fines for parents who do not comply.

At every stage of this offensive against education workers and children, as with the wider “back to work” drive, the Tories have counted on the collusion of the trade unions and the Labour Party. The National Education Union, for example, fully supports the reopening of schools, asking only for a “regular review” of whether masks should be worn, “in light of developments in scientific opinion, experience and practice elsewhere.” Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer said this week that reopening schools was “the priority” and that “Any steps the government makes to regain the trust of the British people will have Labour's full support.”

The pandemic has confirmed that capitalism is a bankrupt system, driven entirely by the extraction of profits, regardless of human lives. The reopening of schools across the globe is part of this drive and nothing else. The working class must act, as part of a unified global movement, to protect and defend its own interests, which necessitates the fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party in the US issued a call on August 5 for a nationwide general strike of education workers, linked with broader sections of the working class. This call stressed that “The development of a nationwide general strike would create a powerful impulse and would galvanise support internationally among workers who face the same life-and-death issues.”

This is the only way forward.

The SEP appeals to educators in the UK to take up this unified campaign. Coronavirus is a global pandemic. The response of the ruling elite the world over has been to place millions of workers’ and children’s lives at risk, forcing the working class to bear the brunt of the economic impact while bailing out the rich. The opposition to the deadly campaign to reopen schools must also be international.

In raising the call for a nationwide general strike, the SEP proposes the following demands for workers to raise in their schools, workplaces and communities:

- Keep all schools closed until the virus is eradicated! With the virus spiralling out of control across the UK, in-person instruction cannot be done safely.

- Full funding for public education and online instruction! High-speed internet access, food distribution, mental health care, special education supports, and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning, must be guaranteed to every student and education worker.

- Halt all nonessential production! Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection.

- For a massive expansion of testing and contact tracing! To contain the virus, universal testing must be provided for all and a rigorous system of contact tracing established.

The SEP calls for the development of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees to prepare for a general strike against the opening of schools and the murderous policy of the ruling class. Please contact the SEP for further information and to participate in the fight for these initiatives.



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