

Reject Johnson's lies that UK schools are safe! For a general strike to block the reopening of schools

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The Conservative government has its lie machine in top gear as it tries to quell opposition to the full reopening of schools in just three weeks. The more science confirms that reopening classrooms will lead to a major escalation of the virus, the more desperate are the government's efforts to bludgeon parents and teachers into submission.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Education Secretary Gavin Williamson have insisted the reopening of schools is "not negotiable", using and misusing politically selected research to claim that "schools are the safest place for children to be."

Johnson wrote in this week's *Mail on Sunday*, claiming the country has a "moral duty" to get children back to school, adding that this is a "national priority". He insisted that reopening schools was a matter of "social justice" before making clear that a resumption of classes was "integral to kick starting the economy."

His interview was published the same day as the latest government figures showed the number of COVID-19 cases in the UK had risen by 1,062--the largest daily increase in six weeks.

On the same night, former Conservative Party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith warned it would be impossible to get the economy back on track if parents needed to stay at home to look after their children. "The economy relies on children going back to school," he said. "Teachers need to accept the fact that children now must be back at school. Teachers should take that as an absolute imperative, not look for reasons why they can't reopen fully."

The reason schools must not reopen is that science and experience have established that it is not safe to do so. Those who ignore this are motivated by their

defence of the economic interests of the corporations, banks, and the super-rich, who have no qualms about teachers and children losing their lives so that they can continue racking up profits.

To conceal this, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson claimed he had "overwhelming evidence" from one of the "most detailed studies yet, which will show that it is safe for schools to fully reopen next month." The study will not be published until later in the year and so is unavailable for scrutiny--there is no suggestion it has been peer reviewed. Despite this, its reported claims were given banner headlines in all the major newspapers. Professor Russell Viner, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, claimed the research would confirm "there is very little evidence of coronavirus transmission where pupils have returned."

Viner is a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). The study was reportedly based on 20,000 pupils and teachers in 100 schools who were tested to monitor the spread of the disease up to the end of the summer term. Viner's team also reviewed 35 studies from around the world which purportedly revealed that "children play a minor role in transmission of the virus and schools play a minor role in transmission of the virus." None of these studies have yet been named.

The numbers of children in school at the time of Viner's research were minimal. Between 10 and 40 percent of primary and secondary schools were closed, open only to key worker and vulnerable children, with a maximum capacity of 10 percent. Social distancing was enforced, and vulnerable children and staff were shielded at home. Many children and staff attended on a

part-time rota basis. Most importantly, the UK was still in lockdown with a minimal reopening of the economy.

This is not the situation that children are returning to. They will be in classes of up to 30, with no social distancing, no PPE, all vulnerable staff back at work, the economy reopening and with millions having returned from holidays abroad and within the UK, and with infections rising rapidly.

Viner's defence of the school reopening displayed a shocking disregard for human life, "Everything you do to reopen society will impact the national R [rate], but reopening schools, we believe, has a very small impact on it. The majority of cases are staff, not students."

There is cold comfort to be had from the claim that it is school staff--and the families of children—who will die.

Viner stressed it was essential the track and trace system was fully functional, which it is not. On Monday, Johnson announced that over 33 percent of those employed in "track and trace" will be made redundant as he culls some 6,000 out of 18,000 people hastily recruited only a few months ago.

Public Health England (PHE), which has undertaken the schools research, is not an independent organisation but a government agency. It was responsible, just prior to the peak of the pandemic, on March 19, for making the decision to stop classifying COVID-19 as a "High consequence infectious disease (HCID)" deliberately downgrading PPE requirements for health workers. More than 540 health care workers have since died.

Once again, with exponential growth of COVID infections set to resume, PHE and SAGE are being called upon to shift public opinion.

Viner claims that PHE's research was based on global studies, but by the time he conducted his interviews his US counterparts had published a study contradicting the entirety of his evidence—even as thousands of students started returning to classrooms in America, against broad based opposition from teachers and parents.

The study published on Monday by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association, revealed just how easily children can get coronavirus. There has been a 90 percent increase in COVID-19 cases in children in the US over the past four weeks. The report, to be updated weekly, found there were 179,990 new COVID-19 cases among US

children between July 9 and August 6. "It's not fair to say that this virus is completely benign in children," said Dr Sean O'Leary, vice chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Infectious Diseases. At least 380,174 total child COVID-19 cases were reported as of August 6, and at least 86 children have died due to the disease since May.

A modelling report published in the *Lancet* medical journal last week, warned that the UK's testing and tracing for coronavirus is inadequate to prevent a "rebound" of the epidemic once schools reopened next month and that this was "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.

The Tory drive to reopen schools as part of its "back to work" agenda has the open support of the Labour Party and the de facto backing of the education unions. The unions support the reopening of schools in September, urging only that a "back-up" be put in place if there is a second wave and a second national lockdown. This consists of a proposal for "blended learning"--some lessons at home, some at school--to "avoid a return to fully remote learning."

Opposition to the Johnson government must come from below. The Socialist Equality Party calls for a nationwide general strike of education workers, linked with broader sections of the working class, as part of an international offensive against capitalism and for socialism. To organise this struggle means building rank and file committees of teachers and other educators, independent from and opposed to the trade unions.



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