

Johnson government forced to retreat on A-level exam results

Thomas Scripps
18 August 2020

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government executed a dramatic U-turn yesterday, retreating on its social class-based downgrading of A-level results.

The retreat comes less than three weeks before the Conservatives intend to force schools to reopen, and just over a month before universities resume.

With final year exams cancelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government had teachers submit estimated grades for their students, most of which were then centrally moderated by an algorithm. Almost a quarter of Scottish results and around 40 percent of English, Welsh, and Northern Irish were originally lowered by at least a grade—over 3 percent in England were docked by two grades or more.

Yesterday afternoon, however, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced with an apology that A-levels results for students in England will now be based solely on teacher-awarded grades, as will GCSE results, awarded later this week. The same retreat had earlier been carried out by the Scottish, Northern Irish, and Welsh governments. Last-ditch attempts by the Tories to offer a few unfeasible token concessions—including allowing students to use some mock exam grades in an unspecified process—fell to pieces.

The precise impact of the government's reversal will take time to come out—some students are already reporting that university courses they have now qualified for have since become full.

The exam results fiasco is a case study in the fundamentally opposed interests of millions of working people, and the capitalist class and all its political representatives.

For the initial assigning of grades, the defining influence on the government's results "moderation" algorithm was social class. In Scotland, the most deprived areas saw the proportion of students receiving

A-C grades reduced by 15.2 percent, while the percentage for the most affluent areas was only 6.9 percent. The same pattern played out in England. More than 10 percent of students in the lowest third for socioeconomic status had a teacher-awarded C grade lowered, compared to 8 percent in the highest third.

This obscured more fine-grained inequalities. Research by social mobility charity UpReach found that subjects taken overwhelmingly by private school students were significantly more highly graded as a result of this process than those taken by the working-class majority. The number of students receiving an A* in Latin increased 10.4 percent, and the number receiving an A*/A in Classics by 10.4 percent.

Private schools increased their number of A and A* grades by 4.7 percent this year, more than double the 2 percent registered by comprehensive secondary schools, and almost 16 times the 0.3 percent increase for Sixth Form and Further Education colleges, catering mainly for working class youth. The Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA) looked at 65,000 exam entries across 41 subjects in its member colleges and found that grades were 20 percent lower than past performances.

Overall, the gap between pupils receiving free school meals—an indicator of severe economic hardship—and those who do not widened significantly, alongside the gap between those with disabilities and special educational needs and those without.

There could be few clearer demonstrations of the class-riven nature of contemporary society. The government desperately needed to get results issued to proceed with its criminal business-as-usual reopening of schools, universities, and the economy. But even when their overriding goal was to move towards reopening as smoothly as possible, to give as little

opportunity as possible for the working class to intervene, and amid endless propaganda of how “we are all in this together”, government ministers and officials could not abandon their vicious class bias for a second.

Their actions unleashed a wave of opposition, setting working class children, families, and schools directly against the government. Protests of young people which began in Scotland spread to England, with its much larger population and student body, greatly expanding the scope of the crisis. The catastrophe was set to be compounded later this week as millions of GCSE results are released for around 700,000 16-year-old pupils. Whereas 82 percent of A-level results were affected by the government’s algorithm, the *Observer* reported that the figure would have been 97 percent for GCSEs.

It is significant that after the liberal media and pseudo-left groups have spent months working to channel multiracial protests against police violence into racist politics, young protestors took to the streets with signs that read, “Classism at its finest,” “It’s blatant classism,” “It’s the classism for me,” “Judge my school work, not my income,” “No Etonians were harmed in the making of this algorithm,” and “Working class does not equal stupid.”

Under these circumstances, the ruling class political machine went into action to prevent this sentiment triggering opposition to the reopening of schools and universities—without having brought the coronavirus pandemic under control.

By Monday, several leading Tory MPs were calling for a delay and a “rethink” in issuing GCSE grades. However, by far the most significant piece of advice was delivered by Labour Party leader, Sir Keir Starmer. Within days of criticising the Tory government’s handling of A-level results, Starmer took to the pages of the right-wing *Daily Mail* to back Johnson’s “reopen schools” policy.

In the same breath as he invoked the results crisis, which exposed the government’s “improving students’ life chances” justification for reopening as a rotten fraud, Starmer exhorted the elitist, social Darwinist Tory leader, “Let me send a very clear message to the Prime Minister: I don’t just want all children back at school next month, I expect them back at school. No ifs, no buts, no equivocation.”

Echoing Johnson’s own words, Starmer continued, “The Prime Minister wrote in this paper last weekend that we have a moral duty to reopen schools. I agree. What he does not seem to understand is that he has a moral responsibility to make sure it happens.”

For Starmer, the only real problem with the A-level results crisis was that it threatened to undermine the pro-business back-to-work agenda that Labour shares with the Tories.

Not a single fundamental issue confronting society can be left in the hands of the ruling class and its political parties. Class society produces catastrophe after catastrophe, destroying thousands of lives and the future of millions at every new turn. The rational and humane solution to social problems—most urgently of all, the global COVID-19 pandemic—demands the independent intervention of the working class, organised in rank-and-file committees in every school, workplace, and neighbourhood in the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact