

UK: WSWs survey finds support for a general strike against school reopening

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A survey of teachers by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) has revealed the depth of opposition to the Johnson government's reopening of schools in Britain, and widespread support for a general strike.

Posted on teacher Facebook groups August 16-19, the survey canvassed opinion among parents and educators toward the government's drive to fully reopen schools at the start of September, despite the escalating spread of COVID-19.

More than 200 parents and staff from secondary, primary and early years settings responded to the survey, from locations across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Despite an avalanche of government and media propaganda, the survey registered overwhelming opposition to the resumption of classes under such unsafe conditions.

"We get one life, if we get this wrong, our children will be more damaged by their parents or teachers dying than being temporarily home schooled," explained one teacher in support of the call for a general strike. "[The] government are more interested in economy than lives of teachers, pupils and families," wrote another.

The WSWs survey used qualitative research methods, with open-ended questions allowing teachers to express their views on issues including government guidance for schools and the inadequacy of safety measures. In revealing the attitude of staff and parents to the actions of the Labour Party and the trade unions, the survey showed how the pandemic is producing sharp shifts in consciousness and political orientation.

Teachers condemned "government propaganda" and denounced Labour's support for the school reopening. More than half of respondents said they would participate in a general strike and nearly one quarter signed up to receive the new Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Educators' Newsletter.

Government guidelines and conditions in schools

The government and a pliant media have painted an entirely false picture of a "safe" return to school in September. No such scenario exists. Their lies are blown to pieces by nearly every response received by the WSWs teachers' survey.

Dozens of respondents had been given no information on how their schools would be operated in just a few weeks' time. Deborah, from Lincolnshire with a son in secondary school, told the WSWs she had received "no information, no risk assessment." Andrea, working in a primary/secondary school in Chesterfield, said "I am still waiting to see a risk assessment and my anxiety is through the roof." Another respondent wrote that they had "yet to be informed by school of changes made to protect pupils. I am not impressed or comfortable with this." Helen, from South Gloucestershire, said she was "Unclear about the procedure, in terms of who needs to isolate and when, in the event of a positive case."

Where people did know the guidance, they reported it was inadequate and contradictory.

Clare, a secondary school teacher in West Lancashire, explained, "the guidance given by the government is nonsensical and completely out of step with more recent research (that children do spread COVID19 and can have long term health implications from the virus), and the government's own guidelines for other situations (e.g. social distancing and wearing face masks indoors)." Jane, also a secondary school teacher, in Carmarthenshire in Wales, agreed, "Gov guidance is pathetic and not following all the evidence [of the] R number increasing."

Many focussed on the sham of the government's "bubble" system, supposedly separating children into different quarantine groups. Some explained that their education settings would have "bubbles" of up to 300 children—the size of some entire primary schools.

Samantha, a primary school teacher from Bradford, West Yorkshire, where the number of COVID-19 cases are among the highest in the UK and rising, said, "We have bubbles of 2 year-groups, 120+ kids. I believe per guidance staff are allowed to move between bubbles and I have not been made aware of any zones set up as of yet. No matter what, the bubbles themselves are pointless as I know of siblings of classmate in all other bubbles and older siblings in two local secondary schools. These bubbles will POP!"

Mandy, a primary school teacher in Crawley, West Sussex, wrote, "Bubbles of year groups—90, that then mix with another bubble in the toilets. Then all year groups mix at breakfast and after school club. Staff all moving. MADNESS!"

Masks have not been mandated in schools, despite the fact, as West Yorkshire secondary school teacher Becki explains, "You have to wear masks in crowded places... a crowded school with no ventilation apparently is fine (and special needs schools will be worse as kids have more needs and less understanding about hygiene, health etc)." A primary school teacher expressed their worry that, "Cramped classrooms and all children facing the front will mean that I will be receiving all the viral load in my direction with no mask to at least prevent me from breathing some of it in." Alice, at a primary/secondary school in Surrey, described how, "Many want to wear masks but as the government guidance doesn't direct or recommend they are made to feel they can't."

One respondent from Walsall reported practically no safety measures in their school: "No staggered timings, children attend all Classes and subjects exactly as usual, children all move around the site together on the bell. 1450 students... Students are to be asked to clean equipment themselves on the lesson changeover... Signage reminding of distancing and hand washing seems to be the only change."

Hayley, another Walsall teacher, wrote, "We still don't have warm running water for hand washing."

Unsafe to return to classes

On the basis of these appalling conditions, and the wider development of the pandemic across the UK, an overwhelming majority of respondents answered that it was not safe to reopen schools.

One said, “With an uptrend in cases and the scientists/doctors fearing a second wave, it is counter-intuitive that any parent would feel confident about a return to school face to face, with or without Government propaganda. Not after this Government has caused thousands of avoidable deaths by getting things wrong and delaying lockdown.”

Lisa, at a secondary school/sixth form in London, replied, “We are being told in my Borough that we will be put under local lockdown if numbers keep rising, yet they think it is perfectly OK to send children back to school. The logic behind sending children back to school during another wave of coronavirus is crazy.” Reopening is “definitely not” safe, according to a primary school teacher in Belfast, who added, “the no. of people testing positive is increasing again.”

“I don’t believe any school setting can be safe enough for our children right now,” wrote Cheryl, a primary school teacher in Lancashire. Samantha, from Bradford, said schools “will pose a large risk for shielded families like ours in an area where local restrictions are in place and numbers continue to rise.”

Amy, working in early years in Shrewsbury, said her education setting “has done what they can, but their hands are tied. The gov shouldn’t be allowing them to open.” Agnieszka, in a secondary school/sixth form college in London, answered similarly, “My school has done what they could within poor guidelines and no additional funding offered from government- I don’t think it’s safe.”

“It’s clearly not safe. Gov = Liars!”, wrote Steve, a supply teacher in a primary school in Devon.

Multiple survey respondents drew attention in their comments to the fact that the government was prioritising “the economy” over health and lives.

“#backtoschoolsafely is just an eye wash. Government is ignoring extra clubs kids visit to outside and within schools, social interaction and commitments of the kids and their siblings or parents is also getting ignored by government. Government is intentionally ignoring it as they are just worried about economy,” said Bhawana, at a primary/secondary school in London.

Sarah, working at a primary school in Surrey, told the WSWS, “I have no faith in the measures put in place by the government. I believe they are using schools as cheap child care to get parents back to work for the sake of the economy. Another person wrote, “Think government are more interested in economy than lives of teachers, pupils and families.” A respondent from Lambeth wrote, “It’s clearly wealth before health.”

Teachers and parents are “scared” and “angry”

These conditions are fuelling growing concerns and resistance among education workers and parents towards the reopening of schools.

Bob, a secondary school teacher in Walsall, explained, “Teachers and staff are being hung out to dry, and both students and staff being used as guinea pigs.” Alice reported that “Staff are nervous” at her primary/secondary school in Surrey, and at Helen’s primary school in Durham “lots of parents are getting very anxious.” She is “really angry at feeling bullied into sending my children into school when I don’t feel it’s safe.”

One respondent noted, “We all know, and doctors/research/own Government advisers have said, that a return to schools can trigger a

second wave.”

The responses included some genuinely harrowing personal stories from people with serious health conditions, or caring for people with them, who will be placed in an impossible position come September.

A parent in Lancashire explained, “We have been shielding our extremely vulnerable daughter since beginning of March. Forcing return to school & threatening fines for non compliance while the pandemic is still rife worldwide is inhuman. What have we even shielded for??” Another parent, Christine from Newcastle upon Tyne, said, “I’m 3 weeks post-transplant and have no immune system due to anti-rejection drugs. My yr 11 child has shielded with me since March and as a family we are very concerned about him carrying the virus home to me.”

Hayley wrote, “This is concerning due to my daughter going for surgery and myself as a single parent. My health isn’t great and having four children makes my bubble humongous and defeats why I shielded in the first place when the virus is very much still there.”

Education workers share the same fears. “I teach teenagers, how can I (I have a respiratory condition) be safe with no masks allowed for many hours in closed space with 30 18-year olds???” asked Agnieszka. She explained, “Many of my colleagues, even very young and healthy ones, are updating their wills and making arrangements within family to minimise risks.”

Lisa, a secondary school teacher in Wokingham, said, “As someone who is extremely clinically vulnerable, I’m scared.” Another teacher, at a primary school, explained, “I’m vulnerable as I have asthma and lung scarring from a pulmonary embolism two years ago. I certainly don’t feel safe.”

School workers responded that they were being intimidated into keeping quiet about their concerns:

“Some colleagues are scared but too frightened to say anything” says Andrea, in Chesterfield. Another teacher, at a primary/secondary school in Walsall, told the WSWS, “we have been gagged from speaking out about the dangers, the deaths of education staff have been dismissed. The staff at my school have been threatened with disciplinary action if we speak out.”

The trade unions and the Labour Party have been “disgraceful”

This situation is a devastating indictment of Labour and the education unions, who are fully behind the government’s “Back to School Safely” campaign. Responses to the WSWS survey revealed tremendous hostility towards these organisations, whose actions were variously described as “appalling,” “spineless,” “shambolic,” “scandalous,” “disgraceful,” “disgusting” and “pathetic.”

Deborah, from Lincolnshire, said, “So disappointed, feel like we are being dictated too. There isn’t even support from unions. This is all [about] getting parents back to work not school.” Helen, explained, “It incenses me. I have paid union subscriptions for 20 years and I expect better representation for my protection.” “Unions have been toothless,” wrote Katherine, a secondary school teacher in Tyneside, “They stated 5 targets had to be met before schools returned. They have NOT been met but unions have given in.”

“Teachers feel like they are simply being thrown into the fire,” said James, working in a secondary school in Carmarthenshire. Anne, working in early years in Colchester, agreed that teachers were “Just being thrown under a bus.”

On the Labour Party, Bob from Walsall and Jane from Carmarthenshire both wrote that there is in effect “no opposition” to the Tory government. Claudia, a secondary school teacher in Birmingham, said, “I am furious about it. No real opposition to speak of in this country.” Steven in Devon

agreed, “[Sir Keir] Starmer’s Labour position is awful.”

Many respondents stated that there was no difference between Labour and the Tory government.

“It’s pathetic. Keir Starmer is blue through and through,” said Amy. Sarah, in Surrey, said she thought “the Labour Party has rolled over and joined the Tories... The Tories want their ‘herd immunity’ and what better way to ensure every child has been in contact with the virus than opening schools?” “Labour Party? You mean the Red Tories?” asked Mary, at a primary/secondary school in Glasgow.

Hayley wrote that both the Tories and Labour “fear the economic downturn more than they fear the loss of life.”

Some have left or considered leaving Labour over this issue. “I have been a loyal member of the Labour Party for years. But not now. I feel very let down over this,” wrote Sue, a secondary school teacher. Katherine explained, “I have voted Labour all my life but Starmer has now lost my support.” A primary/secondary school teacher in Cornwall will also “be cancelling my membership.” Rachel, at a primary school in Norfolk has already “left the Labour party over it. I feel utterly betrayed by them and the ignoring of parents and teachers concerns.”

“Labour is a joke,” another respondent said, “Starmer is a joke. They don’t have the working class’ backs.” Becki, from West Yorkshire, wrote, “Labour is meant to be for the people, none of the government is for the people anymore.” “Our democracy is an illusion,” said Lisa.

among school workers to organise a fightback against unsafe school reopenings. An Educators Newsletter has been established to connect and coordinate struggles across the country. We call on all school staff and parents to sign up today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Support for a general strike against the unsafe reopening of schools

Under these conditions, the WSWS survey found a significant majority of respondents in favour of participating in a general strike. Many indicated that they would “fully,” “gladly,” “totally” or “completely” support such action.

Jane, a secondary/sixth form teacher in Staffordshire explained, “if it saves lives, yes, we should.” “Strike!”, said primary teacher Steve, “This failing government has and is failing us and our children!” One secondary school teacher described a general strike as “The only way.”

Rachel explained, “I think it’s a good idea. We get one life, if we get this wrong, our children will be more damaged by their parents or teachers dying than being temporarily home schooled.”

These responses are a powerful indication of oppositional sentiment among a wide section of parents and education workers. They point to the popular basis that exists for a struggle against Johnson and his criminal reopening of schools. However, the Tory government, the Labour Party and the trade unions are all working to browbeat, isolate and demobilise school workers to prevent such a development, which would shatter the return to work drive demanded by big business.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have argued that the measures and resources dedicated to ensuring the safety and continued functioning of society must be allocated not based on what the ruling elite are willing to pay, but on what the working class needs. We insist that the fight for those measures and resources must be waged independently of the bankrupt Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

On August 8, the SEP in Britain called for “the formation 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.” We called for a massive expansion of testing and tracing and for full funding for online education and for health and social care outside of school until the virus is eradicated.

Events since then, and the response found by this survey, have fully justified that approach. In the next weeks, the SEP will expand its work