

Attend the UK online education forum Saturday September 5, 2pm

Form independent rank-and-file safety committees of teachers, educators, parents and students! For a general strike against the reopening of schools!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

29 August 2020

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on education staff to take part in our online forum on Saturday September 5, 2pm, to launch the Education Rank and File Safety Committee. The aim of this committee is to unite all those opposed to the unsafe reopening of schools and provide the necessary leadership to prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the reopening of schools.

From September 1, more than 1.4 million education staff and nearly 9 million children will have returned to unsafe schools. This takes place under conditions of an escalation of the virus, with the 'R' (Reproduction) rate over 1 in many areas and with thousands of new infections being recorded weekly. Several cities and towns are already under local lockdowns with dozens more at risk due to spiralling infections.

The claims by Boris Johnson's Conservative government that its reopening of schools is based on a "moral duty" to uphold the educational rights of children and ensure their well-being is a fraud. The Tories have nothing but contempt for working class children. They were forced by popular anger to backtrack over the planned removal of free school meals for 1.3 million of the poorest children in the UK and the downgrading of A level results based on a class-biased algorithm. Johnson's earlier plan to reopen schools on June 1 also met with widespread defiance.

This is a government responsible for condemning tens of thousands of the most vulnerable to a premature and lonely death in care homes. Those designated as key workers have been deprived essential personal protective equipment (PPE), leading to the highest proportion of deaths among health and social care workers in the world.

The reopening of schools is based solely on utilising the education system as a childminding service to force parents into unsafe workplaces. It is dictated by the drive to restart the production of profit following the massive multi-billion bailout of the major corporations. It is being imposed through a campaign of public misinformation, smears against teachers, and by intimidating parents with the threat of fines and withdrawal of placements.

No opposition to the Tories can be expected from the Labour Party and trade unions, which support schools reopening and limit themselves to "constructive criticism" of minor issues. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has insisted that Johnson must reopen schools, "No ifs, no buts, no equivocations." The education unions set five tests for the safe reopening of schools, none of which have been met. These demands have now been shelved, with the National Education Union (NEU) merely asking for a "Plan B" to be drawn up for the inevitable COVID-19 outbreaks being

prepared by the government's criminal policy and its own surrender.

The unfolding catastrophe can only be prevented through independent class action. The rank-and-file committees will mobilise teachers, classroom assistants and other educators, make an appeal to parents and the broadest sections of workers, and adopt a programme of measures to protect their safety and lives and those of school pupils.

No effort has been spared to confuse, disorient, and demobilise an effective counterattack by the working class. The lies of the government and the media justifying school reopening must be exposed:

Lie 1: The government is acting on behalf of the educational needs of children, especially the most socially disadvantaged.

This is a cynical effort to exploit genuine concerns that exist amongst teachers and parents. This government has done its level best to destroy the public education system and to ensure that working class children are born into poverty, live lives of terrible hardship and die sooner than those who are wealthy. The damage that will be done to children's long-term educational outcomes by the pandemic is real, but this can be overcome without putting lives at risk. A multi-billion pound injection of funds is needed to provide online learning, reduce class sizes, enable one-to-one support, build new schools, recruit teachers, provide counselling, develop catch-up programmes, and provide state of the art equipment in all schools. The government has no intention of providing any of this. All of society's resources are instead given over to the banks, corporations and the super-rich, while schools scrape around for PPE and funding for additional cleaning!

Lie 2 : Children are less susceptible to coronavirus and rarely transmit the disease.

Prime Minister 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."

In reality, comprehensive studies with large sample sizes conducted in the US, Italy, and South Korea concluded that children transmit COVID-19 more readily than adults. One study from Chicago found that babies and young children can carry viral loads in their throats and airways up to 100 times greater than adults. The spread of the deadly disease in Israel has been largely attributed to the reopening of schools. The reopening of schools in Scotland by Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party government from August 11 has already produced infections in nearly 30 schools. In Kingspark in Dundee, 21 staff and 2

pupils contracted COVID-19 along with four contacts in the community.

The oft-cited Public Health England (PHE) survey published in August supposedly confirming “there is very little evidence of coronavirus transmission where pupils have returned” does nothing of the sort. The study was based on 20,000 pupils and teachers in 100 schools monitored up to the end of the summer term. Of the 121 people affected by outbreaks, 30 were children and 91 were staff. The numbers of children in school were minimal. 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 limited reopening of the economy.

Schools will return in September with over a million adult staff present and nine million children travelling by public transport and with no real measures to contain the virus in operation. In the United States, a limited and phased reopening of schools has already led to 180,000 cases of COVID-19 in children between July 9 to August 6—a 90 percent increase in total cases among children in just four weeks. When children are hospitalised, one in three need the ICU, which is as often as adults. Six percent of these need ventilators. Since May, at least 90 children have died from COVID-19 across the US, many with no pre-existing conditions.

Lie 3: Schools can be reopened “safely.”

None of the protections that have been provided for the broader reopening of the economy are in place for the reopening of schools. Children will be returning to classroom sizes of 30 children, with social distancing impossible. They will be in “bubbles” of up to 240, although many staff are reporting “bubbles” far greater.

The last minute “U-turn” on face coverings, allowing children in secondary schools to wear face coverings in corridors and only in areas where infection rates are high will do nothing to protect children or staff. Face coverings are only effective as part of broader social distancing and testing measures. The track and trace system is a shambles. Testing was meant to be available to all staff and children before schools reopened, but schools have only been provided with 10 testing kits with instructions to use them only in “exceptional circumstances.” One third of testing staff are to be made redundant and many areas report that only 50 percent of contacts are being traced. Weekly tests must take place of all staff to ensure that the virus is not in circulation.

There is no additional funding for regular and “enhanced cleaning” and schools will have to provide staffing for this from their meagre budgets. Schools have been told to use hand sanitiser “sparingly”! The £1.5 billion allocated for “catch-up” lessons doesn’t come close to meeting budget shortfalls of over £5.4 billion over the last three years.

Build the education rank-and-file safety committees:

The Educators Rank and File Safety Committee will be completely independent of the education trade unions. All the education unions support the reopening of schools.

The closure of schools on March 23 was in response to the independent opposition among staff and parents. Millions took part in surveys demanding the closure of schools and many thousands of parents stopped sending their children in. Opposition to the broader reopening of schools was also led by parents, who refused to send their children to school from June 1 in primary schools. The unions called only for an extension of two weeks, to June 15, and then supported a full reopening.

A petition of over 100,000 parents has already demanded the rescinding of plans to fine those who refuse to send their children to unsafe schools. In response, the unions have only called for a case-by-case “dialogue”

with families. Meanwhile they appeal to the Tories to be included in the government’s “national taskforce,” which focuses on the recovery of the economy for the rich and nothing else.

There is broad-based hostility to the role of the trade unions and Labour Party and their support for the government’s agenda. In a survey conducted last week by the SEP, the vast majority of respondents opposed reopening schools and supported a general strike to prevent this. The collaboration of Labour and the unions with the Tories was denounced as “appalling,” “spineless,” “shambolic,” “scandalous,” “disgraceful,” “disgusting” and “pathetic.”

This hostility must now take a conscious, organised form, by joining and building education rank-and-file safety committees throughout the UK.

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.

- For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers! All those who speak out against unsafe working conditions—in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals, or offices—must be defended against any victimisation by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimised must be rehired with backpay.

- The rescinding of the threat of fines for parents who refuse to send their children to unsafe schools! Full income protection to all parents and carers who stay home with their children! The money handed over to the rich must be used to provide full income to those who cannot work.

The catastrophic impact of the pandemic is fundamentally a social and political issue, not simply a medical one. The technology and medical expertise exist to contain the virus, but under capitalism everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite. The demands advanced by the SEP are not based on what the corporations and the politicians claim is affordable, but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, teachers and educators, and the entire working class.

The initiative advanced by the SEP is part of an international campaign. Meetings in the US, Europe, and Australia have taken place. The struggle against the pandemic is a global one and the deadly reopening of schools is taking place in every country. A unified international campaign will be blow to the plans of the bourgeoisie and will develop the self-confidence of the working class.

We call on all those who want to take up this fight to register for next Saturday’s online forum, sign-up to receive our newsletter and join the rank and file committee. Help distribute this statement as widely as possible through social media and among education staff and parents.



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wsws.org/contact

