

COVID-19 outbreaks spread within a week of England and Wales schools reopening

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It has taken less than a week for the Johnson government's criminal reopening of schools in England and Wales to place the lives of educators, children, and the wider community in danger.

There is virtually no part of the UK that has been left unscathed, with teachers and pupils testing positive in both primary and secondary school settings. On Monday, the Department of Education confirmed at least 60 outbreaks. By Tuesday evening, at least 347 schools had been hit by infections--an increase of 97 over the previous day.

Schools in Scotland returned three weeks earlier, leading to outbreaks that were a warning of what was to come that went unheeded. According to the campaign group Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools (BRTUS) reported outbreaks at schools across the UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) stood at 173 for the period from August 12, 2020 to September 7, 2020. BRTUS started to compile a database during the national lockdown when schools were open only to the children of key workers and then covering the period from June 1 when schools were partially reopened. The cases of school-related COVID-19 outbreaks even with limited numbers present and where social distancing applied went largely unreported officially and by the media.

The growing list of affected schools includes Castle Rock secondary school in Coalville, Leicestershire, visited by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on August 26. Johnson was filmed sitting relaxed on the floor of the school gym next to children to instil the idea that schools were "COVID secure." After one staff member tested positive, six tutor groups and two PE classes were instructed on Monday to stay at home and await further guidance.

Last week, with re-openings commencing in England and Wales, the propaganda offensive went into overdrive to overcome widely expressed scepticism that measures

were in place to protect children and staff. Their mistrust was also founded on the Johnson government's long record of criminality, which has resulted in the UK having a higher per capita death rate than the US and the worst excess death rate in Europe. Among the preventable deaths have been tens of thousands of the most vulnerable in care homes across the UK.

The defence of the indefensible school re-openings also involved a sordid campaign of emotional blackmail choreographed by the TV media to inundate the public with the images of children naturally relieved and happy to be ending a long period of isolation. This was cynically used to delegitimise opposition to unsafe school re-openings on the grounds that such sentiments were antithetical to the well-being and educational needs of children.

Even as new outbreaks emerge, the guidance of Public Health England and its counterpart in Wales regarding schools with cases of COVID-19 has been to oppose any systematic containment measures—in line with broader government policy.

The number of schools that have been closed due to outbreaks are in the minority. The 60 reported outbreaks in England and Wales include the Samuel Ward Academy in Haverhill, in Suffolk, where five teachers had tested positive for the virus, and two secondary schools. This included Trinity Church of England in Lewisham, South London, which had delayed its re-opening until September 7 after a teacher tested positive.

However, in Sheffield, South Yorkshire—the fourth largest city in England—none of the five schools where outbreaks have been identified have closed. Rather, children and staff of the respective year "bubbles" to which the individual who has tested positive belongs have been sent home to isolate for 14 days. This is the case at Hillsborough Primary School and Chaucer Secondary School in the Parsons Cross area of the city, which are run

by Tapton Academy Trust. Abbeyfield Primary in Pitsmoor has reported a child testing positive with only pupils and staff in that year group sent home to self-isolate.

The two other schools affected in the city are King Edward VII, with a child in Year 8 and one in Year 11 testing positive, and a fee-paying private school, Birkdale, in which a sixth form student tested positive. Only the year groups concerned have gone into self-isolation. This leaves thousands of school children and education staff in settings which are anything but “COVID secure.”

According to the *Guardian*, an estimated 200 students and 21 staff in Liverpool are self-isolating after five schools in the city reported positive cases. The same holds true for other areas in the north and the Midlands, including Middlesbrough, Bradford, Leeds, Lancashire, Manchester, and Nottingham, as well as Leicester.

The concept of “year bubbles”—officially of up to 240 pupils—cannot prevent transmission. It is a policy premised on the acceptance that schools do not have adequate facilities to ensure social distancing and designed to prevent the closure of schools when the inevitable occurs and a staff member or pupil is infected. It is a policy not of containment but controlled spread—of herd immunity.

The term “government safety guidelines” should by now be viewed as an oxymoron. A prime minister who has likened the government’s local lockdowns in response to the upsurge of a deadly virus to the arcade game “Whack-a-Mole” does not deserve to be taken seriously, other than as a threat to public health. He oozes contempt for the working class, which has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic both in terms of illness and death.

The profit and death calculus of capitalism means that no extra funding is to be provided that would enable containment measures or disrupt the production of profits. Parents are to be forced back to work in unsafe environments and schools are to function as glorified child-minding services in which the spread of the virus is not prevented, but only “managed.” It is noteworthy that the return to school coincided with a second government propaganda offensive calling workers back to their offices.

The response of the education unions to the crisis that teachers, school staff, parents and their children have been plunged into has underlined their refusal to wage any kind of opposition.

Kevin Courtney, the supposedly “left” joint secretary of

the National Education Union, has couched his comments since the reopening purely within the framework of managing the “disruption” caused—not stopping the spread of the virus and the threat to life. It was on this basis that he made a lame appeal for additional funds.

“This should include employing more teachers and looking for additional space to seek to minimise disruption as well as ensuring IT access for children and young people who need it when they have to be at home,” he said.

At no point are the government or the interests of the wealthy elite it serves to be challenged by the unions, even when they produce a homicidal policy. The unions have no independent standpoint based upon the interests of the working class.

This underscores the importance of the Education Rank and File Safety Committee launched by the Socialist Equality Party last Saturday in an online forum to open up a new path of struggle.

The Committee’s appeal states: “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.”

All educators, students and parents who agree should sign up to the Educators Newsletter and attend the next online meeting on Saturday, September 19.



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