

COVID-19 cases escalate with school re-openings: Build educators rank-and-file safety committees!

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It is two weeks since schools were reopened for full teaching following the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By the first week of September all children had to return, joining children of “key workers” who have remained in classes throughout.

The terrible consequences of this decision by the Tory government show the urgent need for educators and parents to act independently to protect themselves, their loved ones and the wider community.

By Tuesday evening coronavirus outbreaks were confirmed at 913 schools across Britain. There are 673 schools affected in England alone. In Scotland, where in-person teaching commenced on August 11, there have been 117 schools affected, 72 affected in Northern Ireland and 61 in Wales.

We know where this experiment in herd immunity is heading. In the US, since the widespread reopening of secondary schools, at least six teachers have died from COVID-19 over the past month, bringing the death toll among educators to at least 210. This is after it was revealed that President Donald Trump knew in January of the massive danger posed by the deadly new disease. The release by senior *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward of taped interviews between him and Trump, going back to February, has exposed a massive conspiracy by Republicans, Democrats and the media to cover up the grave threat.

Likewise, in the UK teachers, children and their families are being deliberately placed at risk in the interests of the corporate elite. Social distancing guidelines have been all but abandoned. The Johnson government’s decision to restrict social gatherings to six—an arbitrary and meaningless figure—means that nowhere is “COVID-19 secure.” Yet still the government, backed by the teaching unions, claims that schools are achieving what is impossible elsewhere.

With Labour Party support, the National Education Union (NEU), which boasts of being the largest teaching union in Europe, is complicit in abandoning its 450,000 members and those they teach to the government’s policy of “herd immunity.”

On March 16—one week before lockdown—Mary Bousted,

NEU joint general secretary, endorsed the government’s insistence on keeping “schools open,” because “They are a major public service. For children on free school meals, they are a place where children get fed. Having your child at school allows parents to work ...”

Bousted made no mention of schools having the responsibility to educate children. Her statement explicitly and deliberately repeated the government’s line that schools were basically holding pens for the children of wage slaves.

One day later the NEU suggested that some schools might have to close. This was not out of concern for teacher/pupil welfare. That day, March 17, the government announced a £330 billion bailout for big businesses. Conscious of growing anger at this largesse for the super-rich while their members were being driven into unsafe conditions, the NEU’s suggestion was intended to back up Tory/Labour claims that “We’re all in this together.”

On April 14, the same day that the Office for National Statistics recorded that deaths due to COVID were 6,000 higher than the yearly average, the NEU launched a petition calling for schools to remain closed to wider pupil intake until “safe.” Signed by teachers, parents and doctors, it reached almost half a million signatures, indicating the immense social and political tensions the unions were seeking to suppress.

Throughout, the teaching unions were in talks with government advisers that had endorsed its herd immunity policy. No one knows what they said because, as in the US, this discussion was conducted in secret. Even before the pandemic, the government had made clear its intention to smash up and destroy the last vestiges of public education, painting teachers as the “enemy within.”

Having secured the financial interests of the oligarchs, the NEU joined in the government campaign to support a return to work. On May 1—the day celebrated as international workers’ day—the union joined demands for schools and higher education to be open “as soon as we can.”

To cover for its alliance with government, the NEU set a 5-point criteria. These were much lower numbers of COVID-19 cases, national social distancing, “testing, testing, testing,”

school protocols for outbreaks, and protection for the vulnerable.

Even as the UK's COVID death toll was rising exponentially to among the highest in the world, the NEU welcomed government plans to reopen schools, especially "[Education Minister Gavin] Williamson's statement that his door is open" for discussions with the union.

On May 20, Boustead tweeted, "We are writing to Gavin Williamson today asking him to set up a working party to really examine the practicalities of wider school opening when it is safe to do so. Reopening schools is a question of logistics, not of risks."

Just as the ruling elite utilised the pandemic to furnish its selfish interests, so too have the trade unions. They are fully aware of the social explosion building up and signed on in the hope of being formally admitted as advisers, and protectors, of government.

This was underscored by the NEU and other unions endorsing government plans for a "phased return" on June 1. Any criticisms they made were only after four prominent members of the government's Scientific Advisory Committee (SAGE) called for a re-think. Even so, this was based on calls for the creation of a "national COVID-19 education taskforce with government, unions and education stakeholders to agree statutory guidance for safe reopening of schools."

Popular opposition meant the schools did not fully reopen on June 1. But the teaching unions showed which side they were on, with the NEU calling on "government to engage in talks ... including the NEU, about how to open schools more widely once the contact tracing system is shown to be working."

This "for the record" opposition has been abandoned. Against all scientific advice, children are being returned to school and the NEU and teaching unions have abandoned all talk of meeting criteria for a safe return.

On June 11, shortly after Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the jobs furlough scheme would end October 31, the NEU followed with a 10-point programme for school reopening. This included so-called "blended learning" and hiring retired teachers to organise catch-up lessons. Little more than one week later, on June 19, it pleaded that it was not too late for the government "to start engaging properly with unions before making further pledges which turn out to be unachievable."

On June 25, a government leak exposed that scrapping social distancing was being considered in schools come September. Instead of opposing this measure, the NEU pleaded "to meet with you [Prime Minister Boris Johnson] and with your Secretary of State for Education ..."

Throwing a lifeline to a widely hated government, Boustead called for government and unions to develop a "coherent strategy that is workable for September." Its 10-point "education recovery plan" has been the government strategy ever since, as it seeks to step up the exploitation of the working class to fund its bailout for the super-rich.

All rhetoric opposing school re-openings has been abandoned by the unions. "We oppose any re-opening of schools before it is safe to do so" has been replaced with, "We all want to see a full return for all pupils from September."

The NEU counsels the Johnson government that it "has to be able to convince school staff that sufficient measures are in place to make it 'COVID secure' for them to work in a class of 30 or more children—with neither social distancing nor PPE [personal protective equipment], and often with poor ventilation."

Thus, schools have reopened despite none of the NEU's tests being met. COVID-19 cases are rising, especially among the young. Research shows that children are just as vulnerable to infection and that the consequences can be deadly.

Social distancing has been scrapped with the drive to reopen workplaces. There is no viable testing system because responsibility has been farmed out to the major corporations. Thousands cannot get tests due to the privatisation of health and social care, which means there is no capacity. Unwell staff are having to teach. Where this is not possible, supply teachers are being brought in—raising the risk of spreading the virus. Teaching Assistants, among the lowest paid in the education sector, are unable to shield themselves due to their specific role. Special Needs teachers are especially at risk, given the medical/health dimensions of their responsibility.

Instead of schools being closed, they are trying to manage with existing staff, with Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) covering teachers or using supply teachers—thus increasing the risk of infection. Parents are threatened with massive fines if they do not send their children to school and are under pressure to deregister to avoid this.

This must end and requires educators mobilising as part of the entire working class to defend their independent class interests. To take this fight forward, the Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators, teachers, and students to attend the next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee on Saturday, September 19, 2–4 p.m. To attend please register [here](https://www.wsws.org/contact).



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