

Students return to UK universities: Build campus safety committees!

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Students are set to return to universities from Monday just as COVID-19 is spreading rapidly once again. What is described as “the UK’s biggest annual migration” involves hundreds of thousands travelling to campuses and shared accommodation, even as restrictions were reintroduced this week limiting private gatherings to just six people.

There has been a 43 percent increase in infections this week alone, driven by a huge spike in cases amongst 17-29 year olds—the same cohort that will be in and around campuses. The rate of infection among this age group is now more than double the national average and rising.

While many universities considered the possibility of transitioning entirely to online learning for this first term, most have committed to at least some face-to-face contact, on the grounds that campus living “is a key part of the university experience for many.” But a key part of the university experience is surviving it and not passing an aggressive virus onto one’s friends and loved ones.

To add insult to injury, the generation that is expected to return to colleges and universities is being blamed by the government and media for spreading COVID-19. Health Secretary Matt Hancock accused young people of ignoring social distancing rules, risking a second wave of the pandemic. “Don’t kill your gran by catching coronavirus and then passing it on,” he said, in particularly cynical and cruel remarks.

Rather than establishing mass testing to ensure the campuses are COVID-safe, the government has announced that testing will be restricted to essential workers due to shortages. Six months on the testing system is highly inadequate, with those unwell unable to get tests or being told to travel hundreds of miles. That it is collapsing now is entirely due to the

reopening of schools, with infections spreading among teachers and pupils.

Campus reopenings will exacerbate this dire situation. Students from all over the country, who had previously been mixing in well-defined groups, are being thrown into close proximity with friends and strangers. This is particularly dangerous in COVID hotspots such as Manchester or Leicester, which will see 100,000 and 40,000 students arriving, respectively. These cities have already had some form of local lockdown, have come out of it or are about to go into one. Many other cities will inevitably follow.

It is urgent that students and educators take matters into their own hands and place no trust in the government, fake opposition parties or the university institutions. Campus safety committees must be built to ensure appropriate safety procedures are put in place to protect the health of students and staff, and fight for increased testing on campuses.

Blaming young people for the spread of the virus is a blatant attempt to conceal that the real policy of the Johnson government, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and all the media is to allow the virus to spread—so-called “herd immunity.” This eugenics-style aim, combined with systemic greed, corruption, incompetence and stupidity, has already led to tens of thousands of deaths, and will cause many more.

The Conservatives and the Labour Party are united in their efforts to “reopen the economy,” driving workers back into unsafe workplaces, opening schools and now universities. For the last months, they have encouraged people to eat and drink out, go the gym and “return to normal,” even as the virus spreads. Young people constitute the majority of the workforce in the bars, pubs, retail, fitness and delivery services that have been pushed back into operation. If they are fortunate to still

be working, they will be travelling from their accommodation and campuses to these workplaces

The *Lancet* warned earlier this summer that without an effective track and trace testing system, the reopening of schools would likely lead to a second wave of COVID-19. Given the higher level of autonomy and higher degree of movement among university students, this warning applies even more strongly to the return to campuses across the country.

The University and College Union (UCU) has said more than a million students moving around the country was “a recipe for disaster.” Yet it is not mobilising its members against this. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer lamented the incorrect A-level results given to potential university students, but there is no statement yet by him or the National Union of Students in response to the murderous drive of the Johnson to get students back to university and paying their fees.

There is widespread opposition among students and teachers, who have raised concerns over the testing policies and alternate learning styles advanced by universities, with numerous petitions and protests demanding a return to online learning.

This opposition is echoed internationally, with graduate students at the University of Michigan in the US taking strike action to demand the shutdown of in-person learning amid the coronavirus pandemic. On September 10, they voted by more than 700 to 400 to reject a proposal from the university administration, which did not meet their main demands, to continue their strike to ensure safe studying conditions for students.

Students are struggling economically, in addition to the health dangers. Between March and July, unemployment rose by 62,000 to 1.2 million—a jobless rate of 4.1 percent. This is before the government jobs furlough ends in November. Young people are the hardest hit, with the number of unemployed 16-24 year olds rising by 76,000. As a result of economic uncertainty, the numbers enrolling for university have increased by 3.5 percent. Jo Grady, the leader of the UCU, has warned that higher numbers will make social distancing even harder.

Regardless of the precise learning styles adopted by universities, students are still expected to pay the same inflated fees of £9,250 for online learning and limited access to resources. As most work in events or in the

service industry, young people have seen their employment opportunities vanish over the last six months. More and more students are struggling to support themselves, with one in five unable to pay their rent. Swansea University, for example, reports an average increase of 190 percent in applications for its hardship fund while Cardiff Metropolitan said it had seen a 125 percent increase.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the student and youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), is committed to opposing these conditions. The fight to defend health and safety against the unsafe reopening of schools, workplaces and universities requires the mobilisation of the working class against the Tory government, its Labour allies, and the capitalist system as a whole.

This Saturday, September 19, the SEP is hosting an online meeting for educators and students in support of those who stand against this murderous drive for a return to universities. We demand that the return of students to university is postponed until effective testing measures are put in place to reduce the risk of transmission among the student population and university staff. We demand an end to tuition fees, the full refund of fees already paid out for this year’s tuition, state funding of higher education for all, as a right, the cancelling of student debt, and the reintroduction of a living grant to cover accommodation and other essential expenses.

We urge students, educators, parents and workers to attend this meeting, discuss these vital questions and join in establishing independent campus safety committees to prevent further senseless loss of life. To attend please register here.



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