

# UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets as COVID-19 sweeps through student campuses

Our reporter  
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Last Saturday, the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee heard contributions from educators, students, and parents in the early years, primary, secondary, and university sectors hit by the spread of COVID-19.

Tania Kent, an SEP member and special needs teacher, said in her opening remarks, “Some 10 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, every major news outlet has called attention to the sobering figure of 1 million deaths worldwide.

“These deaths are the direct result of the discredited and reactionary programme of ‘herd immunity’ adopted in country after country. It means that the ruling elite are participating in mass killings of innocent people in pursuit of personal wealth... Millions more will be allowed to die unless there is an independent, internationally coordinated opposition. This is the aim of the Educator’s Rank-and-File Safety Committee, to provide the leadership and programme to direct the opposition which exists but finds no outlet in the current political set-up.”

In a question and answer session, secondary school teacher and WSWs writer Tom Pearce explained that since the new term, “Everyone is just exhausted, there have been lots of timetable changes... You’re not safe, the corridors are tight, you’re with hundreds of students moving around at the same time. We are supposed to stay two metres away from students, but most classrooms are too small and have up to 32 students in each.”

Thomas Scripps, speaking on the situation in universities, said, “It’s an explosion of cases. UniCovid UK [a website] reports there are outbreaks at most of the major universities and these aren’t just in twos or threes, but in the hundreds if not thousands.”

The cases were not isolated to the north of the country, as the media is portraying, but throughout the UK. “There was an estimation done by a Sussex professor a couple of

weeks ago, he reckoned some 14,000 returning students were likely to be carrying the virus.

“All of this comes from the government’s claim that students could travel all over the country to so-called ‘Covid secure’ campuses and do this with minimal risk. In a year of devastating government lies, this ranks amongst one of the biggest.”

Some students in their early 20s and even some 19-year olds are “getting quite ill with COVID. Some are requiring intensive care and high levels of care. Students are being used as lab rats...”

Scripps described the conditions facing increasing numbers of students forced to self-isolate in often unhygienic conditions and with practically no support. “Some students have even gone days without food and are living under what many have described as a prison-like regime.”

The University and College Union (UCU) is doing nothing. “They [the UCU] warned that universities could become the care homes of the second wave in terms of the spread of the virus. They knew what would happen and no opposition was organised.

“The UCU’s Jo Grady said that there were several universities where staff were looking at a ballot for strike action to defend their health and lives. She said very clearly that the UCU’s policy is not to go forward with strike action. They are seeking negotiations with the university and ultimately negotiations with the government.”

Sasha, a first-year medical student, said, “Thousands like me were forced to move into residences with the senseless promise of a safe living and learning environment... We were told in our welcome pack that simply disinfecting high touch areas and using contact free deliveries will keep us safe in halls. With a lack of

testing, cleaning, and their insistence on a blended learning environment without PPE, it is obvious that the universities have a blatant disregard for student welfare and safety.

“I’ve had clinical skills session for my medicine course where they have only given us a mask, a disposable apron, and gloves where we are doing CPR with around 20 other students. And obviously when you are practicing CPR you are in close proximity and doing the recovery position. The university has said that it may not always be possible for students to observe rules around social distancing in these environments. However, any risks are ‘outweighed’ by the continuation of education...”

“Students have constantly been blamed by the government, the universities, and the media for the increase of cases, but it is they who have put us in this situation.”

Allison spoke from Italy, which had the highest level of infections in Europe during the first wave.

“Schools reopened on September 24. As of yesterday, there are 5,372 new cases including nearly 2,000 school-age children and staff and counting... Without widespread and regular screening in schools how many students are asymptomatic and therefore not detected as positive?

“The government has this week reiterated its commitment that there will not be another lockdown no matter how many cases and deaths, because the economy has to ‘get started’ with an emphasis on ‘Made in Italy’.

“There is a new government decree that will be signed on October 15, which includes fines for violating the new rules of up to €5,000 and jail time from three to 18 months. The average wage in Italy is about €1,250 a month, so this is absolutely draconian.”

Allison ended her remarks by stating, “This disease is global, so too must the working class’ response be a globally coordinated universal walkout.”

Frankie, a graduate teaching assistant, said, “There were plans for online learning. In practise this has meant an inferior online option and students forced into classrooms.

“The spread of the virus may remain on the campus, but the community in the city is clearly being endangered too... It is clear that the virus has already infected large numbers of students on our campus and will continue to spread rapidly, but the response of the local UCU branch has been to pass a motion calling for a strike ballot if the ‘dispute’ they have raised with the university is not resolved, which will mean weeks and possibly months in which the virus spreads uncontrollably without any industrial action called.”

Lucia said she had left her job as a teacher. “I’ve got a child with feeding difficulties. My partner is still a teacher, his classroom has no ventilation. I think it should be illegal to work in a classroom without ventilation. A lot more needs done to make it safe. The testing system has to be working.”

“In primary schools they are going to miss a lot of asymptomatic cases. I agree that schools have to be closed until it’s safe, or it will drive the increase in infection, as it already is doing.”

Lucia said she had put out a petition on the reopening of unsafe schools and for all teaching staff to receive with adequate PPE. It has received over 211,500 signatures, but no media outlet had reported it.

Emma, a parent of primary school age children, said, “I could not agree more with all of you. How can anybody make schools safe? Even our primary school head said they couldn’t guarantee safety.

“My partner’s disabled, and we haven’t sent the kids back. I’m not a teacher, the kid’s mental health is fine. We are trying to sort out the home education, but we’ll be fine. But I think that it’s ridiculous that you should be put in this position. All of the party conferences are online, but they want our children shoved into little rooms with no ventilation.

“There are a lot of parents who support you, and there are also a lot who are in denial. People will believe ‘The schools are safe’ line, so we need to get our message out there that it’s not safe, and I don’t think I’d rest if my kids were in school six hours a day. Thanks for everything you are doing.”



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