

Marcus Rashford's fight against child poverty exposes Labour and trade unions' partnership with Johnson government

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In a class war declaration, Boris Johnson's Tory government voted Wednesday against a motion calling for school children from the poorest families being provided with free school meal vouchers during the upcoming half-term school holiday. The government refused to spend a few million pounds to feed poverty stricken children when schools close for a few days from October 23 to November 2.

The Labour Party's opposition sponsored motion read, "That this house calls on the government to continue directly funding provision of free school meals over the school holidays until Easter 2021 to prevent over a million children going hungry during this crisis."

The vote came after Marcus Rashford, the 22-year-old Manchester United and England footballer, reprised his summer campaign to give free school meals (FSM) to children living in poverty. Rashford was brought up in a single parent home on the working class Wythenshawe council estate in Manchester, with his mother working minimum wage jobs. The family relied on state-funded breakfasts and free school meals.

With the start of the six-week summer school holidays, the government planned that its current voucher scheme would end. Rashford responded with an open letter to MPs calling for food vouchers to continue to be paid during the summer holiday, launching a campaign that resulted in the government U-turning on its intended policy.

Bowing to popular sentiment in favour of the footballer's initiative, Johnson agreed to extend the voucher scheme to the 1.3 million school children entitled to free school meals. He set up the COVID Summer Food Fund at a cost of around £120 million to provide free school meals to those eligible via a £15 food voucher which could be redeemed at one of several supermarket chains.

Rashford has an enormous social media following (Twitter 3.5 million, Instagram 8.8 million) and has utilised his high profile to continue to campaign for the extended use of food

vouchers and against child poverty in general.

With the government stating that it would not continue free school meals during upcoming school holidays, Rashford launched a petition October 15 titled, "End child food poverty—no child should be going hungry". His campaign was given even more impetus when it was announced on Manchester United's official website under the hashtag #endchildfoodpoverty. Rashford was seeking to obtain 100,000 signatures—the threshold for a petition to be considered for a parliamentary debate. Such was the outpouring of support for the campaign that 30,000 signed it in the first three hours and 100,000 within 10 hours. By last night's debate, over 300,000 had signed within a week.

The petition called on the government to implement three recommendations of the National Food Strategy (NFS) it commissioned in 2019. "Without delay" the government should, "Expand free school meals to all under-16s where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefit; Provide meals & activities during all holidays; Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to at least £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme."

The petition noted that "Covid-19 has been tough on us all but Government should ensure children don't pay the price: 14% of parents & 10% of children have experienced food insecurity over the last 6 months; 32% of families have lost income as a result of Covid-19; Demand for food banks this winter is predicted to be 61% higher than last."

A recent survey of around 1,000 children carried out by the Food Foundation charity showed nearly a fifth of children aged between eight and 17 experienced going hungry during school holidays. Extrapolated to the UK population, this represents 1.4 million children. Eleven percent revealed their families had to rely on foodbanks over the summer holidays.

On Manchester United's website, Rashford explained, "For too long this conversation has been delayed. Child food poverty in the UK is not the result of COVID-19. We must

act with urgency to stabilise the households of our vulnerable children. In 2020, no child in the UK should be going to bed hungry, nor should they be sat in classrooms concerned about how their younger siblings are going to eat that day or how they are going to access food come the holidays.”

Johnson’s spokesperson explained the previous U-turn as a response to the “unique circumstances of the pandemic” which would not extend beyond the summer. The World Socialist Web Site noted at the time that “Whatever tactical adaptations Johnson might make, there will be no let-up in the ongoing offensive against the working class.”

The Tories hard-line on free school meals signals their intent on clawing back every penny of the billions they have been forced to spend on various temporary COVID-19 measures, such as the jobs furlough scheme and COVID Summer Fund for school meals.

In the run up to the vote, Tory MP Ben Bradley tweeted, “Gov has lots of responsibilities: supporting the vulnerable, helping people to help themselves, balancing the books. Not as simple as you to make out Marcus [sic]. Extending FSM to sch[ool] hols passes responsibility for feeding kids away from parents, to the State. It increases dependency.”

Rashford responded, “since March, 32% of families have suffered a drop in income. Nearly 1 million have fallen off the payroll. This is not dependency, this a cry for help. There are no jobs!! 250% increase in food poverty and rising...”

Bradley has previously tweeted, in defence of Tory cuts to child benefits in 2012, “Sorry but how many children you have is a choice; if you can't afford them, stop having them! Vasectomies are free...”

Boris Johnson rejected the appeal in the petition even before it was debated. His spokesperson stated, “We took that decision to extend free school meals during the pandemic when schools were partially closed during lockdown. We’re in a different position now with schools back open to all pupils.

“It’s not for schools to regularly provide food to pupils during the school holidays. We believe the best way to support families outside of term time is through Universal Credit rather than government subsidising meals.”

Rashford tweeted in response, “Merry Christmas kids... 250% increase in food poverty and rising. This is not going away anytime soon, and neither am I.”

Rashford’s intervention in the spring not only upended the government’s plans but also forced the Labour Party—who under Jeremy Corbyn and Sir Keir Starmer adopted a stance of “constructive opposition” to Johnson—to put on a show of great concern for children. Then Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey said, “I’m asking all politicians, whatever party they’re in, this is not about party

politics, this is about making sure children don’t go hungry over the summer holidays.” This appeal was solely to ensure that mounting opposition to the Johnson government was diverted into safe parliamentary channels.

Labour’s motion and declaration of support for the petition, including mobilising former prime minister and political has-been Gordon Brown to speak in support of Rashford, was an exercise in rank cynicism. The fact that millions of people live in grinding poverty and many children go hungry in the fifth richest country in the world is chiefly the responsibility of Labour and the trade unions.

Tony Blair and Brown’s Labour governments from 1997-2010 declared they were “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” and social inequality reached record levels while they were in office. Since then, Labour, which controls local councils in every major urban area, in alliance with their trade union partners have collaborated with Tory-led governments to enforce savage austerity cuts of tens of billions of pounds. In 2015, Starmer and current deputy leader Angela Rayner, along with other leading Blairites including Andy Burnham, were among 184 Labour MPs who abstained and allowed the passage of the Tories’ Welfare Reform Bill that slashed a further £12 billion in welfare spending.

This offensive by the Tories and Labour has seen millions of workers lose their jobs, and their terms and conditions ripped to pieces. The result is over 14 million people living in poverty, with the Child Poverty Action Group estimating 4.2 million of these were children in 2018-19.

Marcus Rashford has more fight in his little toe than in the entire Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The unions, which sit on top of hundreds of millions of pounds of members dues and financial investments, have done nothing to mobilise the huge opposition that exists to the hated Johnson government that is reflected in the mammoth support for Rashford’s fight. Instead, they worked with the Tories in a de facto national unity government with Labour to enforce a “mass return to work” and the reopening of schools, colleges and universities—resulting in a resurgence of the virus to record levels and intensifying the economic and social crisis facing an already impoverished working class.



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