

UK teacher describes disastrous lack of safety at reopened schools: “Teachers are at high risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19”

Our reporter
27 October 2020

Primary school teacher Lucia spoke to the World Socialist Web Site after she attended an online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee earlier this month.

In May this year, Lucia launched a petition to fight for personal protective equipment (PPE) for all educational staff. Lucia’s petition won an enormous response, with over 211,000 people signing. The petition can be found [here](#).

Lucia said she began the petition “to raise the issue that there are unsafe working conditions for teachers and teaching assistants in schools. We’ve heard a lot about other key workers being exposed to COVID-19 but there was really nothing in the media about the risk that teachers were under and the lack of PPE.

“At the beginning there was social distancing in schools, but I knew that that wouldn’t be sustained because of the cost of either having to go to part-time learning from face-to-face learning or having to expand the space. The government would have to double the number of teachers and classroom spaces. I just couldn’t see that happening in September.

“I also had to think about the health of my son. I felt torn for a second time in my career. As a parent I was making a choice between my family’s health and my career. Therefore, I decided to resign [at the end of the summer term]. I know that a lot of teachers are in the same position and there will be many more resignations over this situation. Lots of teachers are parents and they have to weigh in the balance of their health with their jobs. I just wanted to be able to do something and the petition was a way to protect them.”

Lucia explained that initially the petition “was very well received. I set it up in May before schools had gone back, and people were taking the virus very seriously, so it quickly got lots of signatures. I shared it on lots of teacher websites and teacher union websites and it very rapidly grew to around 200,000 signatures.”

However, “Once the unions started to raise their concerns of unsafe schools and the media started attacking teachers and teacher unions, that’s when the petition very gradually started to drop off in numbers. That change happened once the media turned on the teaching profession. There was still support but not at the rate I

was getting before.”

Lucia tried to share the petition with national media organisations but was ignored. Among those who ignored the petition was the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party.

“I tried the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Socialist Worker* and the *Morning Star* and *Metro*,” said Lucia, explaining that the *Metro* “ran a story on a teacher.” “I tried the left-wing papers but none of them were interested. I wasn’t surprised because the tone had changed because there was a load of teacher bashing in the press.

“‘Let teachers be heroes’, one newspaper wrote, which is basically, ‘let them die’. Anything that was in praise of teachers was shot down.

“I was in an infant school and we went back in June, so it wasn’t that teachers were out of the classroom. Lots were in school providing education to the children of key workers. The classrooms were open to fewer children, which made it safer but didn’t make it safe.”

Asked if the government has done enough to make schools COVID-19 secure, Lucia exclaimed: “No way! Not in the slightest! They haven’t changed anything other than telling people to wash their hands more.

“We know this is an airborne virus. Eighty percent of transmission is through aerosols, so ventilation is a huge problem. At my partner’s school, a new build, you’ve got very bad air conditioning systems that just recycle air all around the building. They don’t draw a lot of fresh air in and that means there are windows that can’t be opened. They are permanently shut. So even when the air conditioning isn’t working, like in my husband’s school, he can’t open the windows and, since he’s got no ventilation, if there are aerosols in the air that contain these infectious particles (he’s had five cases) they can stay in the air for at least three hours. Sometimes it can be up to 18 hours—so a child doesn’t even have to cough or sneeze, people can transmit through breathing.”

“There are solutions,” she continued. “In Germany they have invested £50 million for purchasing HEPA filters. They are used in hospitals to purify the air, but the UK government hasn’t given

schools a penny towards making schools safe. Schools haven't even got the money for extra cleaning staff, let alone extra staff. The main thing that needs to happen is to reduce the class sizes massively.

"I feel the government is breaking the law—if the risk is not reduced then there must be PPE. If a teacher dies, is it corporate manslaughter? Why aren't the unions launching a legal challenge? Headteachers are being asked to do the impossible and make schools 'COVID-19 Secure' so [the government] can blame the schools and not themselves."

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is seeking to mobilise teachers independently of the education trade unions, who have collaborated with the Johnson government's unsafe agenda of reopening all schools, despite the danger to teachers, pupils and their families.

Asked her thoughts on the unions, Lucia said, "The unions have their hands tied. They are very concerned that they are fighting a losing battle they don't want to lose. They have already been weakened by the laws on strike action. The government has not engaged with them and the fact that they have to get 50 percent in the strike ballot is stopping them. If they call a strike and don't get support, they think they will have lost and that will make them weaker."

A member of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee responded, "The record of the teaching unions has been one of collusion with the government. At every turn they supported the government. They have been consistent in calling for union involvement in the reopening of schools. They had nearly half a million signatures against the reopening of schools and sat on their hands. Instead they have waited for the government to engage with them and have just rubber-stamped the government's guidance."

Lucia replied, "The unions also got mixed messages over the summer. Teachers wrote to them over the summer. Lots like me said 'this is dangerous', others said, 'we want to get back to teaching, what can we do?' The union felt they didn't have unanimous support from their members."

Lucia continued, "The issue is about people's health and people's lives. The union need to recognise this as teachers are leaving and quitting the profession."

Addressing other safety issues teachers are facing during the pandemic, Lucia said, "Conditions have always been challenging but education workers are at risk, struggling to access testing. There is no routine testing in schools.

"Teachers are at high risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19 because of the lack of social distancing and adequate PPE in schools, as well as poor ventilation. Schools meet all the criteria for high transmission of this virus—they are crowded indoor environments, where large numbers of children and staff have close and prolonged contact with each other. The vast majority of classrooms are too small even to space each child a metre apart and it is impossible for teaching staff to keep their distance.

"The majority of children are not even wearing masks. Some teachers have been told that they cannot wear face masks. It is not easy to teach in a mask because a teacher needs to be able to project their voice clearly. Even clinically vulnerable staff are being forced to work in these unsafe conditions.

"Teaching staff are being failed by a completely inadequate test, trace and isolate system. Testing is too difficult to access and too slow. Lots of children are being denied tests because they have different symptoms to adults. This is not recognised.

"Recent research shows that children are just as infectious as adults and younger children are more efficient at transmitting the virus. However, lots of cases in children are going undetected as they are more likely than adults to be asymptomatic or have only mild symptoms. Research shows children that are asymptomatic still have high viral loads. I am concerned about the high viral loads that teaching staff are being exposed to, as this correlates with more severe illness.

"The government said initially that if there was a case in a class, then the whole class would be isolated and tested. This is not happening. Now Public Health England are advising that only children and staff who have been in very close contact with a positive case should isolate. This ignores the fact that this virus is airborne and transmitted primarily by tiny infectious particles that can travel a lot further than two metres in an indoor space.

"We were also told that if there were two or more cases in a school then the whole school would be closed, and everyone would be tested. This is not happening, so outbreaks in schools are not being suppressed.

"SAGE [Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] have said that closing the schools can reduce the R [Reproduction rate] by 0.5. There has been all this emphasis on hospitality but it's not hospitality that's driving the rise in cases."

Asked about the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee's demands, including for schools to be closed until deemed safe by teachers and other staff, Lucia replied, "I agree with the demands. Schools need to be closed to get the number of cases down.

"There needs to be information that is transparent, as I have heard of schools not sharing information, and the education system needs full funding to cope with online learning. I will definitely share the article and try and recruit more members and teachers who need to share the message."

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators, parents and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and attend its next meeting on Saturday, October 31 from 2pm-4pm. To register click [here](#).



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact