

Teaching unions deepen collaboration with Johnson government's "herd immunity" school policy

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COVID-19 infections are spiralling out of control with predictions of 100,000 new daily infections in the weeks ahead. Hospitals are near capacity and deaths have passed 1,110 per week. Schools and universities now constitute almost 50 percent of daily infections, overtaking every other sector since their reopening from September 1.

The majority of infections amongst school students are asymptomatic, meaning millions are at risk from an invisible disease. Statistics show infections and deaths spreading from the young across all age groups. This was predicted. Prominent scientists warned the reopening of schools and universities would allow the virus to spread uncontrollably. The "let it rip" response of the Johnson government is having deadly consequences.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has defined the Conservative government's policy to the pandemic as "malign neglect"—an indifference to the protection of the lives and wellbeing of the population. Johnson's "herd immunity" agenda could not have seen the light of day had it not been for the criminal role of the education unions. The National Education Union (NEU), the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASWUT) and University and College Union (UCU) worked to ensure that teachers' opposition, concern and anxiety over the reopening of campuses and schools was dissipated and subordinated to the demands of big business.

The insincere posturing of the education unions in the last two weeks, including their polite letter to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and their call for part-time rotas in areas under Tier 2 and Tier 3 lockdowns, are aimed at stemming and suppressing the widespread anger among teachers to the unions' rotten capitulations to the Johnson government. They will do nothing to block spread of the virus.

Under conditions where over 50 percent of schools have had COVID-19 outbreaks, the NEU, parroting the line of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, called on October 16 for a "circuit breaker" lockdown. Labour was the most fervent advocate of reopening schools, with Starmer stating they should be open "no ifs, no buts, no equivocations".

Labour backed Johnson to the hilt, echoing the Tories' sickening and hypocritical claims that schools must open in the interests of public education and to protect the most disadvantaged children. Throughout the pandemic, the Johnson government has refused to extend school meal vouchers to the poorest children, whose numbers are swelling through job losses and the ending of the furlough scheme.

Starmer's proposed "circuit breaker" is a fraud. Under conditions where the consequences of the Tory government's policies have produced a catastrophic rise in infections, Labour insists that schools remain open and has rejected calls from the unions that half-term be extended for an extra week.

Half-term comes to an end across the country today with 600,000 children forced to self-isolate last week due to school infections—a devastating indictment of the decision to reopen schools.

The response of the NEU to the government's rejection of its call for a national "circuit break" was not to turn to its 500,000-strong membership but to write a letter to Williamson calling for the introduction of part-time rotas for school attendance in Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas for secondary school children. The measure excludes the millions of teachers and children in primary schools and nurseries.

COVID-19 infections among primary age children (Age 2 to School Year 6) have grown three-fold in recent weeks yet despite this the NEU claims primary schools

are “safe”. Teachers have responded with anger on social media, with one teacher writing: “Yet another teacher mystified as to why the NEU think primary school staff are immune to COVID, that is the only reasonable explanation I can think of for them not including primary schools in their 2 week circuit breaker.”

Another teacher asked, “NEU would u advise primary staff cancel subscriptions as seems u only value health of secondary staff? Primary has no distancing, no masks + often no windows open fully to enable ventilation, the only ‘safety’ measure on offer”.

The government has not responded to the NEU’s latest letter to Williamson, a desperate appeal that they be incorporated into the decision making process. The government knows full well they can rely on the unions to enforce their policy of keeping children in schools and keeping their parents in work to protect the profits of the major corporations and financial institutions.

Government ministers have been warned that the spread of the disease in the south is following the same hotspot pattern of the north and is just a few weeks behind. Steven Riley, professor of infectious disease dynamics at Imperial College London has put the R (reproduction rate) of the virus in London at close to 3—a higher rate than the average across the UK.

Calling for national lockdowns “sooner rather than later” Riley told *Times Radio*: “we are showing a pattern in the southern regions that looks very much like the pattern in the northern regions a few weeks ago.”

Riley added: “Unfortunately it does show that the overall approach of trying to do the least possible in the smallest possible area... which is what lots of countries around the world are trying to do... is not working as well as we would hope. Clearly the number of infections is going up and the age distribution of those infections is not just in the young people, it’s clearly spreading out into the older ages who are more at risk. The inevitable conclusion of these findings is that hospitalisations and deaths are going to increase more quickly than we had thought until these data were seen.”

Professor Neil Ferguson, the Imperial College London scientist whose modelling prompted the UK-wide lockdown in March, told PA news that measures in Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas are “unlikely to cause daily cases and deaths to fall rapidly”. He said modelling suggests this could leave the country with high caseloads for several months.

The teaching unions, well aware of this information, are playing a key role in allowing the spread of the virus.

The UCU has called for legal action against the government for allowing the return of face-to-face teaching, but the lecturers’ union supported the reopening of classes, all scientific warnings to the contrary. When staff at Leeds, Birmingham and Warwick universities called for strike ballots over COVID-19 safety concerns these were overturned by the UCU, which has refused all calls for a coordinated nationwide stoppage.

The NEU junked their supposed “5 tests” for the safe reopening of schools, which included the R rate being below 1, testing and track and trace being fully operational, and social distancing and protections for vulnerable staff. There has been a catastrophic failure in the track and trace system, yet the unions are doing everything in their power to assist the government.

Educators must draw critical lessons from their experience with the trade unions.

The only viable method to fight back is the development of an independent network of action committees to close schools and campuses to save lives. The Socialist Equality Party has established the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee which is growing in support across the UK. It fights for a unified global movement and calls for a general strike of educators throughout Europe and internationally, to protect lives over profits against the homicidal policies of the ruling elite.

Educators should study the statement “For a general strike against the reopening of schools” and register to attend the next meeting of the Educators-Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday, October 31. The situation is urgent, but the mobilisation of the massive social power of the working class against capitalism will provide the only progressive solution to this crisis.



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