UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets as Johnson declares schools and campuses will remain open

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2 November 2020

Saturday's online meeting of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee took place under conditions of extraordinary crisis with the coronavirus pandemic spiralling out of control across Europe.

In the UK, with the National Health Service on the verge of being overwhelmed and 4,000 daily deaths predicted by Christmas, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced on Saturday night to announce further lockdown restrictions.

The measures will do nothing to halt the spread of the virus as schools, colleges and university campuses will remain open.

Robert Stevens, the World Socialist Web Site's UK Editor and a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) introduced the meeting's international panel of speakers, "We established our committee so that education workers can have their own voice. In whichever country you look, the trade unions are in partnership with the government and all parties who are insisting schools be opened and that parents go to work in unsafe workplaces."

Tania Kent, chair of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, a special needs teacher and leading SEP member, explained the disastrous situation in schools, "600,000 children are having to self-isolate… Over 50 percent of secondary schools and 20 percent of primary schools have had cases of COVID. Scientists have suggested 85,000 deaths is a huge underestimation.

"The death this last week of Angela Stanton, an English and Drama teacher from Afon Tâf High School in Wales, received little press coverage, but shows the dangers facing tens of thousands of teachers," Kent said.

Asked about the response of the National Education Union (NEU) to the exponential rise in cases, Kent replied, "The NEU junked their supposed '5 tests' for the safe reopening of schools, which included the *R* [virus Reproduction] 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. They must call emergency meetings throughout schools. They must form independent rank and file safety committees to fight for the immediate closure of schools through networks using social media. These must be globally linked, throughout Europe where identical issues are faced.

"Where staff are forced to work, PPE and adequate safety measures must be implemented. There must be a turn to online teaching which must be fully funded. All vulnerable staff must work from home with full wages.

"There must be strike action developed to implement these measures as the government will not accept school closures. This will be in conflict with the unions and in a fierce struggle against them. The only viable method to fight back is the development of independent action."

Messages of support were received. Kelly Barnfather wrote, "Children in schools should wear face masks to help stop COVID. Schools are mass indoor gatherings of hundreds. The heating is on which doesn't help slow the infection as windows and doors are closed. Schools are like a massive incubator for COVID to spread."

Sarah Beuchamp wrote, "Forcing in vulnerable staff and all staff is unforgivable. Threatening parents and carers with fines and prosecution is unforgivable."

A London primary school teacher wrote: "We have a number of teachers and students down with the virus--one teacher hospitalised. Keeping schools open has nothing to

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do with the children and everything to do with money-making from the work of parents."

Danny Knightley, a panellist from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and a student at Oxford University, described the appalling conditions facing students: "The majority of college accommodation has gone into complete or partial isolation, with students not allowed to leave their rooms. Hundreds of us are in isolation due to someone in my building testing positive for COVID-19.

"No test was organised--this we had to do on our own initiative. We are not allowed to leave our rooms to pick up food deliveries from college gates, and friends and family members are not allowed to deliver food. We receive one small meal a day at 12pm. I have been informed by friends in Manchester University they are charged £18 and have police surrounding campuses and accommodations ensuring that no one enters."

Knightley opposed official efforts to blame young people for the spread of the pandemic, "this from a government who urged young people to return to work in the service industry, pubs and restaurants, to facilitate the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, part of the government's herd immunity policy, which has left thousands dead.

"The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the return of students would lead to a sharp increase in coronavirus cases and deaths. The Labour Party and the National Union of Students remained silent, and the University and College Union made a perfunctory statement yet failed to mobilise its members. Protests have come from students and teachers outside of union oversight."

Lucia, a member of Boycott the Unsafe Opening of Schools Facebook group also spoke. In May, Lucia organised an online petition demanding PPE for school staff, which has gained over 211,500 signatures. She said, "There are a lot of parents that are very frustrated because they don't want to send their children back to unsafe schools, but they are being threatened with fines and de-registration.

"My husband works in a secondary school with zero ventilation and windows that don't open, with more than 2,400 children in the school. It's very unsafe, with lots of children already having been infected and families infected. As parents we want to support teachers and we don't feel we have a voice."

Ruth, a parent and teacher, said, "I think we could harness the pressure from parents. There are many parents that feel powerless, and even though petitions usually don't get debated, they are a great way forward as it brings awareness to the issue."

Danny Westwood, a technological support worker said that COVID infections in his school were being concealed, "You have teachers that just disappear from the premises," he continued. "You are not allowed to discuss with colleagues their whereabouts. We have been forced to source our own masks in order to protect ourselves."

Speaking from Germany, IYSSE panellist Gregor Link said, "After over 9 million cases and 250,000 deaths from COVID-19 this year, Europe stands on the brink of catastrophe. In every European country, the reaction to the pandemic has been driven by the profit motives of industry and the super rich.

"Massive student protests, school boycotts and school occupations have erupted in Greece and Poland, inspiring many students in Germany and across Europe. In Germany, two rank-and-file student committees have already formed.

"The urgent political fight for safe education and life is bound up with the struggle for socialism."

The final panellist was SEP member Evan Blake, who addressed the meeting from Detroit, in the United States--the epicentre of the pandemic and of the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s.

Evan stressed, "uniting parents and teachers is absolutely vital, and our committees are the only ones fighting for this. Yesterday we passed the grim milestone of over 100,000 new cases.

"Regardless of the outcome of the US 'civil war election', the crisis of American and world capitalism will only deepen. Biden and Harris have pledged not to impose any lockdowns and to keep businesses and schools open."

Summing up, Kent reported that the NEU was calling for school closures to be part of the government's restrictions. "The unions are not urging all teachers to walk out now" she declared. "They are placing demands on the Tories. They are instruments to strangle, to divert the hostility and anger to the escalating virus.

"We will support strike action. It must be part of a unified movement internationally, involving broader sections of workers."

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