

National Education Union belatedly begs Johnson government to close UK schools during lockdown

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The National Education Union (NEU), the UK's largest teaching union, has called for a temporary closure of schools.

A few hours before Prime Minister Boris Johnson's widely trailed announcement last Saturday of a month long lockdown, the NEU put out a press release, "Close schools and colleges as part of national lockdown".

Johnson continues to insist that all nurseries, schools, further and higher education must remain open during the lockdown.

The NEU advised the Tories, "Ignoring the role of schools and colleges in the spread of the virus is likely to lead to the need for even longer lockdowns in future." Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney said, "It is clear from ONS [Office for National Statistics] data that schools are an engine for virus transmission. It would be self-defeating for the government to impose a national lockdown, whilst ignoring the role of schools as a major contributor to the spread of the virus."

The NEU itself envisages only a temporary closure of schools, calling for "rotas to be introduced at the end of the lockdown period." The union even offered the government an alternative if they still refused to shut schools during the four-week lockdown. In that case the Tories should "as a minimum be preparing for school rotas at the end of that period..."

As infections rocketed in schools, the NEU did nothing for weeks, leaving its members at the mercy of the Tories herd immunity agenda. Only in the last few weeks, with infections at thousands of schools and with hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren having to be sent home to self-isolate, did the NEU called for "a two week circuit break over half term to include schools." It stated that the Wales Government and the Northern

Ireland assembly had carried this out, "but the Government in Westminster has ignored this call. More severe measures are now called for as a result, the Government should not make this mistake again."

Schools and campuses have been turned into a battleground in which the lives of pupils, students, teachers, and parents are at stake.

The NEU cites estimates from the ONS "that 1% of primary pupils and 2% of secondary pupils have the virus and that these levels have increased dramatically since wider opening in September." The union notes that a 2 percent virus level "means that in every three secondary classes, on any given day, you can expect two of the students to have the virus."

Its analysis of ONS figures revealed that "virus levels are 9 times higher amongst primary pupils and an astonishing 50 times higher amongst secondary pupils."

To put that level of infection into context, there are 8.89 million pupils in 24,360 schools in England. The number of pupils in state-funded primary schools is 4.71 million, with a 1 percent infection rate equating to 47,100 with the virus among that age group. A 2 percent infection rate among the 3.41 million pupils in state-funded secondary schools means another 68,200 children are infected. This means that in English primaries and secondary schools total infections are over 115,000.

In the London borough of Havering, parents of a child at one school were informed Sunday that "over 50 schools have been affected by the impact of the virus and many more than once." This is the majority of schools in the borough with a population of nearly 260,000.

The NEU call has nothing to do with organising a

genuine fight aimed at keeping schools closed in the middle of a pandemic. The union bureaucracy fears above all that it will no longer be able to control the disaffection that has been building for months among teachers and other education staff opposed to being railroaded to work in unsafe schools.

An indication of the strength of feeling is the massive response to the NEU's petition campaign calling for school closures, launched along with its press release. The petition was signed by 150,000 teachers and support staff in less than 48 hours. Another petition created September 22 demands, "Reclose schools and colleges due to increase in COVID-19 cases," aiming "To protect teachers and pupils and their families," passed 334,000 signatories on Monday.

The other main teaching unions, NASUWT (313,565 members), National Association of Head Teachers, and the Association of School and College Leaders, continue to back the government keeping schools open—with the caveat that there should be a few safety measures in place.

Teachers and parents have taken to social media to vent their anger. One teacher posted a Twitter comment Saturday, "I am a member of @NASUWT and I have zero faith in them or any other union as they have proven to be completely ineffective against our ridiculous government."

The unions have been aware since the start that schools are an "engine for virus transmission" and that the government has ignored every request to make schools safe. This exposes the fraud of the NEU campaign, which is opposed to mobilising the collective strength of its more than half a million members. It instead centres on "calling for an amendment in Parliament to the lockdown bill to include schools and colleges."

Those signing up to the NEU's petition are invited as the next step to write to their MPs, i.e., the government and the Labour Party opposition, who both insist that schools remain open!

The NEU continue their treacherous role in propping up the government, albeit with a change in rhetoric. The Tories could never have enforced their schools reopening plan—to get parents back into workplaces as the basis to reopen the wider economy—had it not been for the role of the education unions. As the pandemic hit, opposition among millions to schools staying open

forced their closure even before the national lockdown was imposed March 23.

In May, the NEU, in line with government moves to lift the lockdown, wrote, "We want to begin to reopen schools and colleges as soon as we can". But the union had to respond to teachers and staff, who knew schools were unsafe. The NEU called for "Five tests for Government before schools can re-open", which included the *R* rate being below 1, and testing, track and trace being fully operational. These conditions were all junked.

The NEU has been forced to call for school closures not only as a result of the pressure of their own members, but due to the fight waged by the Educators Rank-and-File-Safety Committee and campaigns waged by parents and teachers. The committee, founded in September and initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, has given a political voice for teachers, parents and students who are demanding the closure of unsafe schools.

Educators and parents cannot entrust the trade unions with their fate and lives of their families.

All non-essential production must cease during lockdown. Children of key workers and vulnerable children remaining in schools during this period must be provided with full protection, with the necessary levels of social distancing imposed. Parents must receive full wage replacement while they care for their children. Poorer families must be given special support and receive high-quality equipment for digital learning.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls for teachers to act immediately to halt the government's murderous herd immunity policies of keeping schools open. Emergency meetings must be called in all primary and secondary schools. These must establish rank and file safety committees, independent of the unions, to ensure for the immediate closure of schools. Educators must prepare a national strike, organised through rank and file initiatives, in opposition to the government's policy.



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