

# Jennifer Jones calls for united action in parents strike: “Are things serious enough for a mass walk out? How serious does it need to get?”

Our reporter  
3 November 2020

Jennifer Jones of Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the parents’ strike called for this Thursday.

We last spoke with Jennifer in July. Since then, the organisation has gained more than 14,000 members, with local chapters in London, Leeds, Sheffield, Barnsley, Bradford, Kent, Staffordshire, Essex and Bristol.

WSWS: Could you explain why Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools has called for a parents’ strike this Thursday to keep their children away from school?

Jennifer Jones: There was no existing legislation to stop a community-organised strike. We are not bound by the government’s anti-strike laws and do not need to complete paperwork or ballots or give advance notification. The reports and comments from our group of nearly 14,000 parents showed there was a feeling that now is the time to act.

WSWS: Could you tell our readers about the threats against parents who keep their children off school?

JJ: The worst we’ve seen—among the hundreds and hundreds we have been sent, including threats to fine or threats of forced de-registration—is a PACE [Police and Criminal Evidence] letter from a Local Authority’s Education Welfare Officer that included a police caution. This is the extent that some Local Authorities are going to. The bullying and the browbeating are making parents ill who are already poorly and keeping their children off school due to disabilities and/or clinical vulnerabilities.

Most of the parents keeping their children off school were previously shielding during the first lockdown. Or

people like myself, with a low immune system due to a disability who have elected to self-isolate. The fact that you have a concern about your own personal health—will you be there for your child? Or who will look after your child should you become ill? All these worries are being added to by bullying from Local Authorities and in some cases head teachers.

WSWS: Is it true that parents are being threatened with jail?

JJ: Yes, under the Education Act 1996, Section 444. This is legislation that was [originally] targeted at parents for not sending their child into school, not providing home education and not maintaining contact with the school. It’s for a child who is at risk. What this legislation does not cover is a pandemic.

We believe we stand a very good chance of overturning some of this legislation with the help of our barrister. This legislation takes no consideration as to minority BAME, disabled or families that may be at higher risk. There are children suffering from conditions such as cystic fibrosis, heart conditions, or asthma who are being forced into school and their parents threatened.

WSWS: What do you think about organising united action by parents and teachers to close schools under conditions where the pandemic is raging?

JJ: We support the fact that the National Education Union has called for school closures and we think they are right to do so. There are lots of different pieces of legislation they can use, such as workplace health and safety to support their challenge. The government’s own scientists and Independent SAGE are calling for

schools to be closed. We would welcome any school workers to join the parents' strike, and there are a lot of parents in our campaign who do work in schools.

We know there is anti-union legislation that prevents workers from taking more direct action. Are things serious enough for a mass walk out? How serious does it need to get?

We cannot comment on how the unions handle the situation. Some people have had their children out of school since March and some people will be striking for the first time, because the failure of the government to include schools in the new lockdown is the straw that has broken the camel's back. This is not good enough, when the experts are saying schools need to be closed to reduce the *R* rate as quickly as possible. It is not okay for the government to ignore expert advice. It is exhausting fighting this battle.

WSWS: Yesterday in France assemblies of teachers met in dozens of schools and took the decision to strike, and student walkouts have taken place today in Paris. They are facing a similar situation. What do you think about uniting with teachers and parents in France and developing a united struggle across Europe?

JJ: The virus is a threat to all of us, wherever we are and regardless of age, workplace, and ethnicity. It will certainly be more effective with many voices speaking as one.

WSWS: BRTUS has sent a letter to the NEU calling for support. Do you know if there has been a reply to that letter?

JJ: No, we have not received a response to that letter, but our door is always open for any of their members with concerns, even if they are not parents. We are happy to engage with any workers who want to get in touch.

WSWS: While the NEU has called on the Johnson government to include schools in this month's partial national lockdown, they have issued no call for strike action by teachers to fight for this.

JJ: The lockdown was announced Saturday. No one knows what's going on behind closed doors and we can only live in hope that there will be a message or an email from the NEU to us.

The GMB union has backed our campaign, for example. They are perfectly happy to support our campaign, to share our literature. There is no issue and loads of their membership have been involved in our

campaign.

I think the fact that the virus is at different levels in different parts of the country is certainly part of the problem, because when I see teachers commenting publicly, there are sometimes people who are in a less affected area who do not agree with schools being put in a lockdown. But the position we are in for example in the North was very different three months ago or two months ago.

All it takes is a few weeks for the virus to seed a community and from what we can ascertain from the thousands and thousands of cases in schools that we have mapped, but also from confirmation from some local authorities, there has been in-school transmission. Schools staying open in small numbers are seeding communities with the virus.

One of the public health areas in the Leicester area said on the radio today that a child is more likely to catch the virus at home than they are at school. If parents and children are staying at home that can't possibly be true. On the other hand, there is evidence for in-school transmission and Rainford High is one example, where they tested the entire school in Liverpool and found 70 asymptomatic cases, so of course its transmitting in schools.

WSWS: What would be your message to parents about this Thursday's strike?

JJ: If somebody has been feeling very worried and upset about sending their children to school as the pandemic increases, now is the time to be with other like-minded people, to have access to support, access to free legal advice, access to home learning resources and access to a huge amazing varied network of other parents from all over Britain, who will say nothing to you other than, "welcome to the group".



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**