

Parents' strike called Thursday in UK against threat from COVID-19

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Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools: Parents United has called for a parents' strike on Thursday against the Johnson government's refusal to close schools amid a coronavirus pandemic already claiming almost 400 lives a day.

The strike is timed to coincide with the start of a month-long lockdown announced by the Conservative government on Saturday, which excludes schools, colleges, universities, and the majority of workplaces.

"We have waited until the time is right to strike. That time is now," the group explained in a Facebook statement issued Monday.

Thursday's action coincides with strikes across France by thousands of teachers against the unsafe reopening of schools. Teachers were joined yesterday by student walkouts in Paris that were met with police violence, including the use of tear gas. Conditions are ripe for a united offensive by parents, students and teachers across Europe against the herd immunity strategy of capitalist governments that are sacrificing lives to defend profits.

As of yesterday, more than 1,000 parents had registered their support for the UK parents' strike, despite a campaign of censorship by the mass media.

In their call for action, Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools (BRTUS) condemned the Johnson government's "callous and reckless decision to play Russian Roulette with the physical, emotional and mental well-being of our children, our nation's school staff and our communities."

More than 8,000 schools have been infected with COVID-19 and 148 education staff have died from the virus, according to the latest figures from the UK's Office for National Statistics. A staggering 2,000 percent increase in the infection rate has been registered among 11-16-year-olds since the reopening of schools.

They have become the primary vectors, along with universities, for transmission of COVID-19 to older and more vulnerable age groups.

On Saturday, as news leaked that Johnson's lockdown would exclude schools, social anger erupted. #CloseSchoolsNOW and #PutSchoolsintheLockdown were the top-trending items on Twitter. A petition to reclose schools and colleges posted online has gained more than 380,000 signatures.

But the National Education Union (NEU) has no intention of mobilising this sentiment and has steadfastly opposed calls for strike action against the Conservative government's homicidal policies. As winter approaches, teachers and students are being herded into crowded and poorly ventilated classrooms, with no PPE, no social distancing and a dysfunctional test and trace system.

On Monday, BRTUS sent a letter to the NEU asking them to stand "shoulder to shoulder" with parents. But they have received no reply.

Earlier this year, the union contacted BRTUS, requesting they remove the word "boycott" from their name, underscoring the union's complete support for the reopening of schools and its opposition to any mobilisation against the Johnson government.

The NEU is hostile to the development of any strike uniting parents, teachers and students. Johnson's determination to keep schools open enjoys the full backing of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and the Trades Union Congress. All of them agree that the interests of the City of London and the super-rich must take precedence over public health and the lives of the working class.

The necessity for unified action to save lives is shown by the mass infection rates across the UK. In line with the advice of epidemiologists and public health experts,

BRTUS has developed a five-stage traffic light system showing when schools should be shut: low, medium, high, very high and critical.

At the “high” stage, defined as 50 cases per 100,000 people in the past 7 days, BRTUS recommends the closure of schools. Where there are more than 100 cases per 100,000 people, urgent government action is required. At the “critical” stage, with more than 250 cases per 100,000 people, the government is deemed to have “utterly failed”.

As the BRTUS live-map shows, most of the UK resembles a failed state, with more than three quarters of its landmass in the high, very high and critical stages. The same pattern is repeated across the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and the United States, with millions infected and hundreds of thousands of people dying.

Lucia, a member of BRTUS and a former teacher, is supporting Thursday’s parent strike, “Parents are extremely frustrated that they are not being given a choice about whether to send their children to school. It’s a really stressful time for families.

“Teaching staff, including my husband, are working with no protection, no PPE and no social distancing—very few people would be willing to work under those conditions.

“In almost every other country, parents are being given a choice. But here, we are facing fines and being threatened with deregistration if we home-school, which means [children] losing their school place. Fines are being imposed, cumulatively in some cases. You can even be threatened with jail.

“In June and July, two thirds of parents chose not to return to school. If you give parents a choice, they won’t send their children back. Making it compulsory was a lever to push parents back to work.”

Thursday’s parent strike poses the need for a coordinated network of rank-and-file committees linking parents with teachers, students and broader sections of the working class. Such independent committees are needed because the trade unions and Labour Party defend capitalism, are opposed to any fight and are working in a de facto government of national unity with the Tories.

Urgent action is needed. The demand must be raised for a political general strike to close schools and implement policies to protect the population, provide

adequate remote learning and defend livelihoods. If not now, when? All parents with school-age children must receive a full income to look after their children, while key workers must have access to free childcare at school or at home, with PPE and regular testing for staff and students.

While the parties of the capitalist class claim there is “no money” to fund these vital measures, the working class must answer: Confiscate the obscene wealth of the billionaires! The trillions of dollars in wealth and resources monopolised by the oligarchy must be used to fund the National Health Service, to provide students with access to online learning and a living income for all during the pandemic. Such necessary measures can be achieved only through the independent and united struggle of the working class in Britain, Europe, and throughout the world.



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