

UK teachers, students and parents across England support strike action to close schools, welcome French teacher strikes

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The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is calling for a political general strike to close schools, colleges and universities. On Wednesday, the government imposed a limited month-long national lockdown which excludes schools and other education settings. The Tories were backed by the Labour Party.

This leaves millions of teachers, parents and children at risk of a second wave of COVID-19, which has surpassed the levels of infection during the first national lockdown and is part of the government's programme of "herd immunity".

The vote took place on the deadliest day for the virus in the UK since May, with 492 COVID-19 deaths reported. This was the highest fatality rate per capita in any country in the world that day.

Schools and universities now account for almost 50 percent of daily infections, overtaking every other sector since their reopening in September. This criminal policy must be opposed in a unified movement of the working class in the UK and across the European continent.

Governments throughout Europe have rejected calls by scientists, parents and teachers to close schools to protect lives. This is meeting resistance from educators and students.

On Thursday, the first day of the national lockdown, the Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools: Parents United group organised a "Parents Strike" against the government's refusal to close schools.

The action followed strikes by thousands of French teachers against the Macron government's unsafe reopening of schools. Teachers were joined Tuesday by student walkouts in Paris that were met with police violence, including the use of tear gas. Hundreds of schools have been occupied throughout Greece by students protesting the same issue, and there is growing

and militant opposition in Poland.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) spoke to educators, parents and students. Many were encouraged by and supportive of the action taken by teachers in France. Many were also critical of the role of the education unions in allowing schools to reopen in September and to remain open despite the serious risks posed.

Jo Marsh, a primary teacher from London, said, "I agree with the striking French teachers... How can we take lockdowns seriously if you don't close schools?"

"The unions have put up no serious opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools. They put out a series of conditions which schools supposedly had to fulfil in order to protect teachers and students, many of which have not been met and, to my knowledge, have done nothing to fight for even these minimal demands."

Marsh supported a general strike as the "government is only interested in profit. Any pretence that they care about children is belied by huge cuts in funding for schools."

Samantha, a foster parent, said, "I agree with the striking French teachers. Education is vital but can be caught up on later. Keeping vulnerable loved ones alive is the absolute priority."

"The unions have been too quiet for too long... Overcrowded and poorly ventilated rooms are the worst place to be and pupils and teachers are being forced into this daily. I used to have faith in the unions, but I have much less faith now."

Asked if she agreed with the demand for a general strike, Samantha said, "Yes. People cannot be replaced. Any death caused by school (indirectly or directly) can and must be prevented. In-school teaching is becoming a political decision instead of a health decision. Children learned from home March to July, why can't they now?"

Another parent commented, “I agree that school settings at present are unsafe for both students and staff. I stand in support with teachers across France. The unions have not provided strong enough support for either students or staff. Teachers have a duty of care for students and no one can say schools are safe so teachers should do whatever is needed to protect our kids.”

Kate from Newcastle said the National Education Union’s polite call for the closure of schools was “Too little too late. I’m glad I’m no longer a member as they’re a waste of money”. Strike action was needed, she said, as “Governments are repeatedly ignoring evidence and have failed in providing a safe environment. No other profession is crammed in rooms without PPE.”

Jacqui, a parent from Huddersfield, said, “I support the protesters in France. Their right to work and study in safety has been abused. I don’t think the unions have remotely supported their members, especially clinically vulnerable members of staff.” She supported a general strike, “Because lives are being put at risk and governments are ignoring this.”

Fiona, a support worker from Merseyside, said, “Yes, I support the French teachers, indeed. It’s time we put forward such action also. I don’t think the unions have done enough up until now. I’m really worried as a parent and educator even though I’m a healthy 40-year-old, I know how unpredictable the disease is and I don’t want to risk my life.”

Ruth, a teacher from the Isle of Wight, said, “Our union is telling members to 'collectivise' which is what we did when we joined the biggest education union. They mean the opposite—take individual action in individual schools—which just doesn't work.”

Supporting the call for strike action and walkouts she said, “I know from social media that many other parents and teachers are just as concerned as I am that schools are not safe and that our lives and health are at risk from a Covid infection myself or our children may bring home. But they feel the threat of losing pay, losing their jobs, or being fined or visited by Social Services if they or their children are not in school.

“Like us I'm sure they wish schools would close, at least during the so-called lockdown, and then re-open in the safer ways scientists have modelled, teachers have suggested and some other countries are using. We feel isolated and need someone to take a lead and help us to do what we know is right for our children and families.”

Khushi Amin, a student from London, said, “I agree with the French teachers! I stand with them. I would like

to do the same. The unions shouldn’t have let schools reopen without proper safety measures such as blended learning or rotas.”

Frankie, a Teaching Assistant from Lancaster, said, “Students and teachers are absolutely right to walk out and protect their lives. The imperceptible ‘lockdown’ in France and the attacks on protesting teachers and students shows that the Macron government, like Johnson, thinks working people should ‘embrace death’. The fight of all educators internationally is to protect the right of everyone to life and a future...

“The unions have fully embraced the reopening of schools and campuses. My local branch of the University and College Union has been, since before the campuses reopened, fighting a delaying action against its own members. We were told that the union couldn't call for a walkout, or even suggest we all invoke Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act as it would ‘open us up to disciplinary action’. We were told that it would be ‘unreasonable’ to ballot for strike action before a series of behind-closed-doors meetings, which the union said in advance wouldn't resolve anything, were completed. Now that those meetings are over, there's a consultative ballot to decide if there will be an actual strike ballot, and then if the strike ballot is completed before the end of term there will no doubt be another excuse.

“The only people who can protect lives are parents, students and educators, and the only way they can do that is to walk out on strike. Appeals to politicians are worse than useless: Labour and the Tories are working together to insist schools are ‘the last thing to close...’ If parents and teachers place any faith in these pro-business politicians they will be betrayed.”

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today calls for emergency meetings in every school and campus to raise the demand for a political general strike to close schools and implement policies to protect the population, provide adequate remote learning and defend livelihoods.

We call on teachers, parents and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today and make plans to attend our next online meeting on Saturday November 14 at 2pm.



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