

UK parents' strike sabotaged by trade unions and Labour Party

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Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools (BRTUS) called a parents' strike last week against pupils being forced to attend school during the escalating COVID-19 pandemic. The strike was held last Thursday, coinciding with the start of the partial national lockdown ordered by Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson, which excludes schools, colleges, universities and non-essential industry.

The main demands issued by BRTUS enjoy widespread support: that schools be closed to all but vulnerable and key worker children, that fines and other threats against parents be lifted and that students have access to comprehensively funded and resourced remote learning.

A *Daily Express* poll shows 58 percent in favour of closing schools to help stop the spread of COVID-19. The latest YouGov poll (November 2), found 46 percent support for closing schools and colleges as part of the current lockdown, with 12 percent unsure.

Thousands of parents joined last Thursday's strike from areas including London, Sheffield, Doncaster and Stoke-on-Trent, Scotland and the Isle of Wight, according to BRTUS. Since it was founded by Tony Dadd six months ago, BRTUS: Parents United has won nearly 15,000 members.

During a Facebook livestream on the morning of the strike, Dadd was asked whether he had a message for Education Secretary Gavin Williamson. He replied, "We are only interested in the safety, health and education of our children. This isn't an overtly political campaign. *You* have politicised this issue. We're a pressure group and represent something like 50 percent of the population. We know there's massive support that isn't heard, and the momentum is with us."

Dadd's comments raise important political issues for parents and teachers. Any fight to close unsafe schools, protect families and save lives, is, by definition, a political struggle. Dadd notes the "massive support" for school

closures "isn't heard". But why not? Which political forces are responsible for this? If more than 50 percent of the population believes that schools should be shut to suppress the pandemic, why haven't mass strikes and walkouts been organised at schools, colleges, universities and workplaces against the Johnson government's "herd immunity" agenda?

Events surrounding last week's parents' strike provide the answer. When the strike was called on November 2, BRTUS called on the National Education Union (NEU) to support the strike and stand "shoulder to shoulder" with parents. But the NEU and other teaching unions refused to back the strike, in a deliberate act of political sabotage. Like their fellow bureaucrats in other unions, NEU officials, led by Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted, feared that any promotion of the parents' action would draw behind it the active support of the NEU's 450,000 teacher members.

Two days earlier, BRTUS published a statement, "Together we are strong. GMB and Unite support BRTUS, it's time for the NEU to join the fightback". BRTUS provided no information about what support had been offered by the two unions. But neither Unite, Britain's largest union, nor the GMB, whose membership includes the majority of teaching assistants and support staff, published so much as a statement of support on their websites, let alone called on their own members to strike.

Instead of condemning the actions of the NEU and appealing over their heads to teachers and support staff, on October 31, BRTUS wrote, "The NEU need to collaborate with other school stakeholders—parents--by working with Brtus: Parents United (the largest parent-led safer schools campaign in the UK)". In line with this pitch for official recognition, BRTUS is watering down its demands for a boycott of unsafe schools to accommodate to the NEU's fake fight against the Johnson government.

In their letter to the NEU two days later, BRTUS wrote,

“we support you in your latest package of demands: 1) Improved testing available for school communities 2) Smaller class sizes 3) Guarantees that vulnerable staff can work from home 4) Increases in school funding, and 4) A Public Health review of all school outbreaks.”

These demands are a political evasion. Despite the NEU’s polite calls for schools to be included in the current national lockdown, the union has steadfastly opposed any mobilisation of its membership to fight for this. The education unions all supported the full reopening of schools in September, suppressing teachers’ calls for strike action in favour of local school “risk assessments”.

The outcome of the NEU’s collaboration with the Conservative government has been catastrophic. More than 8,000 schools have been infected with COVID-19 and 148 education staff have died. Among children in years 7-11 in England, COVID-19 infections increased 50-fold between September 1 and October 23, up from 40 cases to 2,010. Schools, colleges and universities account for more than 50 percent of virus transmission across the UK.

With BRTUS’s claims of “union support” exposed as threadbare, former Labour MP Laura Pidcock was drafted onto the group’s livestream on the morning of the strike to provide the illusion of “labour movement” backing. A protégé of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Pidcock is a rising star of what passes for the official “left” and is currently contesting for a position on Labour’s National Executive Committee.

After her defeat in the December 2019 general election, Pidcock was installed as National Secretary of the People’s Assembly, a meeting ground for the Corbynite left in the Labour Party and trade unions, with Britain’s pseudo-left and Stalinist organisations.

Pidcock was unable to cite a single example of Labour Party or trade union “support” for the parents’ strike, pathetically declaring that she was speaking in a personal capacity. She did not even mention that she was in the Labour Party. Her statement that “I’m a socialist and collective action should be supported” is worthless. Neither Pidcock, Corbyn, the NEU, GMB, Unite or any of the teaching unions posted a single tweet or statement supporting the parents’ action on November 5.

One of Pidcock’s leading allies on the People’s Assembly is John Rees of the pseudo-left Counterfire organisation. In a video posted on BRTUS’s website, Rees offers praise to BRTUS as a “grassroots” organisation. But if BRTUS were to openly defy the NEU and appeal for united action to close unsafe schools,

Rees’ “support” would immediately evaporate.

One day after the strike, Counterfire published an article amplifying the false message that Labour MPs including Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Ian Mearns and Grahame Morris are backing parents’ fight against unsafe schools. Such claims are political fiction. While the MPs cited by Counterfire had posted pro forma messages of “solidarity” on BRTUS’s website, not a single Labour MP, including Corbyn, opposed Starmer’s insistence that schools must reopen, “no ifs, no buts, no equivocations”.

These experiences contain vital lessons. As the working class come into struggle, the ruling class and its political agencies in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, along with their pseudo-left accomplices, intervene at every point seeking to neuter any independent challenge from below. But they have nothing to offer the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supported the parents’ strike. Our warning that the unions were sabotaging a united struggle by teachers and parents have been confirmed.

The central lesson from last week’s parents’ strike is that any effective action against the escalating COVID-19 pandemic—including mass strikes and walkouts to oppose unsafe schools and workplaces—requires a political rebellion against the corporatist pro-capitalist trade unions and Labour Party.

In August, the SEP founded the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to mobilise the immense social power of the working class—parents, students, teachers and support staff—against the unsafe reopening of schools. In opposition to the murderous policy of herd immunity which sacrifices lives to profit, the SEP advances the fight for socialism: the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and the complete reorganisation of economic and social life in the interests of the majority.

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



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