

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands schools and campuses close to halt the spread of the pandemic

Our reporter

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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met Saturday as the pandemic spirals out of control globally, with the number of cases in the UK surpassing 60,000. The meeting was held under the heading, “Close Schools and Campuses: Save Lives”—a demand all the more imperative with the prospect of a vaccine being rolled out in the spring.

Moderator Tania Kent, a special needs teacher and Socialist Equality Party member, opened the meeting by introducing panellists Will Morrow, a member of the SEP’s French sister party (Parti de l’égalité socialiste), secondary school teacher Tom Pearce and PHD student and tutor Frankie.

Tania described the catastrophe unfolding in the US: “The worst-case warnings of public health experts have come true. A quarter million people are now dead. [This] underscores the necessity for urgent action to be taken by the working class for a general political strike to protect lives.”

In contrast to the herd immunity policies of world leaders, the working class is demanding measures to halt the spread of the deadly contagion: “There is growing pressure among New York City educators to stop in-person learning in the largest school district in the US...”

“A parallel situation is developing throughout Europe.”

Will Morrow said, “The character of the pandemic, which respects no national borders, poses the necessity for the working class to unify its struggles across Europe and internationally.”

Health services in Italy and elsewhere are being overwhelmed: “A horrifying video has gone viral showing an overloaded hospital ward in Naples, with an octogenarian lying dead on the bathroom floor,” he continued. “Patients are receiving oxygen treatment in cars.

“In France, a staggering 932 more deaths were recorded in the past 24 hours... The number of people hospitalized, 32,654, surpassed the previous peak from April.

“In Italy, the national doctors’ association called for immediate lockdown. In France, Rémi Salomon, président

de la commission médicale des Hôpitaux de Paris, called for the closure of schools...”

“At dozens of schools, teachers held local meetings and voted to refuse to enter classrooms. The strikes were developed among rank-and-file teachers, not by the unions...”

“Students also organised demonstrations last week outside over a dozen schools to demand their closure. They were met with a crackdown by police using teargas and riot shields...”

“The trade unions intervened to shut down the strikes and ensure schools remain open.

“Massive resources must be invested to provide a high standard of living to everyone throughout the pandemic, [and] to maintain online learning for students.”

Secondary school teacher Tom Pearce outlined a similar disaster unfolding in UK schools: “More than 8,000 schools have been infected with COVID-19 and 148 staff have died. Among children in years 7-11 in England, COVID-19 infections increased 50-fold between September and October...”

“Schools, colleges and universities account for more than 50 percent of virus transmission—schools are a driver of the infections.”

Pearce pointed to the role of the trade unions, attempting to suppress the growing movement of educators and parents to close schools.

“Three of the largest teachers’ unions supported the government’s policy to exclude schools from lockdown.

“As infections rocketed in schools” the National Education Union (NEU) finally called “for schools to be included in the second national lockdown. This was supported by over a 100,000 members but nothing was done.”

The NEU urged members “to write to their MPs, the government and the Labour Party opposition, who insist schools remain open!

“On the first day after lockdown—1,000 parents took part

in a school boycott, supported by tens of thousands.

“BRTUS (Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools) called on the NEU to support the strike and stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with parents. The NEU and other teaching unions refused, in a deliberate act of sabotage. The unions feared any promotion of the parents’ action would draw behind it the support of the NEU’s 450,000 members.”

Speaking in a discussion period, parent and SEP member Kelly said she participated in the parents strike and commented, “The WWS is the only organisation calling for a European wide strike and unifying the struggle of parents and teachers.”

Colin, a parent and nursery teacher from London noted the “alarming” increase in infections among nursery age children which he said had risen from zero cases in September to over 600 cases by the end of October.

Emma, a parent, sent a note to the meeting saying, “Reported weekly COVID cases have increased from a handful in June to several hundred in October. [There were] 668 in the week of 26th October in the early years setting, which has increased. This is from zero which is an extraordinary increase.”

Moderator Tania explained the broad-based opposition to the refusal of the Johnson government to close schools: “An NEU survey found that 150,000 teachers who responded within 24 hours said that they would support the closures of schools, and 58 percent of parents according to BRTUS are for the closure of schools. There is this developing movement and an effort to ensure it doesn’t break out of the control of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.”

“The NEU did not publicise the event, it did not call for support for the strike. The Labour Party and GMB and Unison, the biggest unions that represent hundreds of thousands of teaching assistants—there was zero reference on their websites on the day of the strike to support this. We raised that lessons have to be drawn, that any orientation to the labour and trade union bureaucracy will be a death trap.”

Panellist Frankie spoke about the growing anger among students against the contemptuous treatment they are suffering from the government.

“Any talk about ‘Covid-secure’ campuses was a lie,” he said. “The majority opened without mass testing on campus. In universities where a campus is removed from the town, students who want to be tested would be travelling some distance, possibly by public transport...”

“Before the pandemic it was widely felt among students that they were ‘cash cows’, the universities constantly pushing up enrolment and class sizes, charging huge rents for student halls.

“On the day lockdown was announced, Fallowfield campus students in Manchester woke up to find the

university had put up seven-foot fencing around the campus. To enter or leave they had to pass through an ID check. The university justified the £11,000 security measure saying they were responding to concerns about non-residents entering. Students saw it was part of the university’s campaign to blame them for the spread of the virus, and to keep them from leaving their halls. After the fences went up, students protested.

“You can see in videos that this wasn’t an anti-lockdown protest against health measures—almost everybody was wearing masks as they tore down the fencing.

“Manchester students had been taking part in rent strike since last month, and the heavy-handed actions of the university just raised tensions. That’s what led to the student occupation of a residential tower on the Fallowfield campus, and a peaceful, socially distanced protest. This was met by a heavy police response, with police and campus security filming students in the protest, blockading the occupied building to stop anyone from getting food to the occupants, seizing PA systems used by students at the protest.”

“There have been over 43,000 confirmed cases among staff and students,” said Frankie, and “shocking methods [are] used across the UK to stop students from leaving [campus]: fire doors held shut with cable ties, security patrols with dogs, threats of expulsion... it was obvious that universities couldn’t let students go home because they relied so heavily on income from rents...”

“The University of Manchester is part of a ‘working group’ of Northern universities, local authorities and private landlords for student accommodation who arranged charter flights to ensure 7,000 Chinese students came to the UK for in-person teaching—putting their lives in danger so the university can gather rent and the enormous fees international students pay.”

The meeting urged educators and parents to:

1. Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
2. Sign-up for the Educators Newsletter
3. Join the Educators Facebook group
4. To set up an Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in your school community contact us here



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact