

UK city of Hull becomes new COVID-19 epicentre fuelled by unsafe schools

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A further 501 people died across the UK in hospitals yesterday, within 28 days of testing positive for COVID-19, bringing the total official number of deaths recorded in hospitals from the virus to 53,775.

The real figure, based on analyses of excess deaths data cited by the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian*, indicates that over 70,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the UK.

The port city of Hull is the latest to be named as the worst affected area of the UK for infections. Hull, the fourth-largest city in the Yorkshire and Humber area, with a population of over a quarter million, has seen its infection rate soar to 776.4 per 100,000 people.

Throughout its history, Hull has been a military supply port, trading hub, fishing and whaling centre and industrial centre. Like other de-industrialised cities, it suffered decades of decline, neglect and the growth of social deprivation. All of these social indices have worsened with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, as unemployment and poverty has rapidly increased.

There can be no doubt that the reopening of schools at the behest of corporate profit interests has served as a transmission belt for infections in largely working class communities in Hull and every urban centre.

Barely a month after the reopening in September, half of all new infections were emanating from schools, colleges and universities, with over 30,000 school pupils infected.

Official statistics show that by November 12, 64 percent of state secondaries had reported infections, an increase from 38 percent the previous week. In the same period, cases in state primary schools had doubled to 22 percent.

In Hull alone, 57 of the city's 97 schools have been affected, while in the wider East Riding area, cases have been reported in 103 of 150 schools.

Numbers are surging daily among pupils and staff. According to the *Hull Daily Mail*, since March the virus has entirely closed four schools, while other schools sent

home entire year groups, or started implementing a rota system of school attendance. Many parents have pulled their children out of school to protect them and their families from the spread of the virus. One in four children in Hull are absent from school, according to official figures.

This week, Labour Party councillor Peter Clark, the cabinet member for learning and skills, declared Hull's entire school system to be "on the brink of collapse" with almost 15,000 students and teachers currently absent, either ill with COVID-19 or in self-isolation.

In the face of unrelenting government propaganda insisting that schools are safe, many parents who recently spoke to the *Hull Daily Mail* expressed a class conscious understanding as to why schools had been reopened.

One mother, who did not wish to be named, decided not to send her four-year-old son back to school after his period of self-isolation finished during half term. She said: "The virus will not slow down with schools still open..."

"I sent my son to school in September when they first went back as cases were a little quieter then and he was there right up until three weeks ago when his bubble closed due to an outbreak.

"I decided after half-term that he wasn't to go back as I don't agree that the schools should be open during lockdown. They weren't open in the first lockdown, so why is it all of a sudden safe for them to be open now.

"I am pregnant and in third trimester and very conscious of the risks involved for me but the decision really was taken in order to keep my whole family safe.

"The children going to school should not be used as a tool to keep parents in work and the economy moving and that's the only reason they are open in my opinion."

Vikki Hallet has removed her 14-year-old son from secondary school. She said: "I kept my son off after having panic attacks and really worried after having to

shield the first time round. It's alright people saying they should remain open for mental health but they haven't seen my son's mental health throughout this."

The newspaper reported that many parents were only sending their children to school under the threat of fines.

Newington and Gipsyville—a western suburb of Hull which currently has the equivalent of 1,129.5 infections per 100,000 people—is one of the most deprived wards in England with poverty entrenched for years. In 2015, 18 percent of households were living in fuel poverty and 31 percent of dependent children were classed as being in poverty. A fifth of working age people were forced to claim social security benefits in November 2016.

On November 9, all 420 pupils at the primary school in Gipsyville were sent home after an outbreak of the virus. Many parents fear sending their children back.

Gavin Storey, who has Crohn's disease and severe osteoporosis, leaving him vulnerable to infection, has a daughter at the school. He told the *Guardian*; "Our Leah isn't going back. She's frightened of bringing it [Covid] home and then her mam and dad die." His older three children are also at home after Sirius Academy West, the local high school, closed to all pupils except one year group.

Storey's comments attest to a growing sense of political awareness among workers regarding the class questions raised by the pandemic. The *Guardian* notes, "Like many in Gipsyville, Storey sniffs a government conspiracy... he thinks it suits the ruling class to let the virus run riot through deprived communities like his, where you can buy a three-bed terrace for £52,000.

"It seems like they are trying to get rid of us," he said. "That way when it's over they won't have to spend so much money around here. Let the kids go to school, spread it to their parents and then let them all die. Most of the people in the country who are on benefits will be dead."

The terrible situation in cities like Hull follows a decade of brutal austerity policies, imposed from 2008 by Labour and from 2010 by Conservative-led governments and facilitated by largely Labour controlled local councils and their trade union partners.

In 2019, a third of children in Hull were living below the official poverty line. This coincided with lower levels of official unemployment, as most of these children were in families of employed parents in low-paid jobs.

A survey conducted at the time by the Association of School and College Leaders showed that 96 percent of headteachers surveyed said pupil poverty had increased

over the past few years. 91 percent said they had to provide clothes for disadvantaged pupils. All but three of the 407 headteachers surveyed said they had made cuts to their school budgets since 2015.

Sarah Bone, headteacher of Headlands School in Bridlington, near Hull, was quoted in the national media last year saying, "We have far too many children with no heating in the home, no food in the cupboards, washing themselves with cold water, walking to school with holes in their shoes and trousers that are ill-fitted and completely worn out, and living on one hot meal a day provided at school."

As is the case globally, health care workers have been disproportionately affected and killed by the virus. Nicola Diles, a nurse at Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, died on Sunday from COVID-19. She was the third member of the team at the trust to have died after contracting the virus. Adrian Cruttenden, an administrator in the trust's medical records team, died in Hull Royal Infirmary on May 27. Biomedical scientist Richzeal Albufera, who worked in the laboratories at Castle Hill Hospital, in Cottingham, north west of Hull, died on June 9.

To fight the pandemic, workers need new organizations of struggle, independent of the Labour party and trade unions who have ensured the that unsafe workplaces, school, colleges and universities have been kept open. The Socialist Equality Party has initiated the independent Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the NHS FightBack campaign. We urge workers and students to join these committees and build rank and file organisations in every workplace and education setting.



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