

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets as Johnson ends one-month national lockdown

Harvey Singh
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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met last Saturday, ahead of Boris Johnson's lifting of the one-month national lockdown. Daily infections remain at a dangerously high level and Johnson intends to roll back the remaining, inadequate restrictions over December, culminating in the mixing of multiple households from all across the country at Christmas.

The impending catastrophe places renewed emphasis on the committee's call for a general strike to close schools and workplaces until the virus is eradicated and kept under control.

A short video produced by the committee was shown at the beginning of the meeting.

The meeting's chair, *World Socialist Web Site* writer and secondary school teacher Tom Pearce, pointed to reports showing that infections are spreading rapidly in schools.

Tania Kent, a special needs teacher and Socialist Equality Party member, gave an update on the situation. Kent said that schools were a "major vector" for the virus. "The latest figures from the DfE [Department for Education] showed three in four secondary schools have pupils off isolating after potential contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in their school.

"The department estimates that 876,000 pupils were off last week because of COVID-related reasons. More than one in five secondary pupils were absent.

"A school in England randomly tested 501 pupils and found 151 had COVID-19, as well as 15 staff."

Asked to elaborate on the Boris Johnson government's policy of herd immunity and the position of the Labour Party and trade unions, Kent said, "The Labour Party continue to back Johnson to the hilt, with sections outflanking him on the right.

"Workers overwhelmingly oppose this calculated endangering of human life, but Labour and the trade unions are working systematically to prevent this opposition gaining a political voice and leadership.

"The education unions continue to support the opening of schools. The National Education Union ditched all their demands for safety measures and now appeal to Johnson to keep schools open on part-time rotas.

"Only through an independent mobilisation of the mass strength of the working class can workers defend their interests."

Kent reported the mass support that exists for such a struggle: "58 percent of parents surveyed support the closure of schools. Many groups have been set up. We have given voice to this on the WSWs through several interviews on the harrowing conditions and choices families are forced to make. The BRTUS [Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools] group is one we have identified as an important development and several members have participated in our online forums as well as granting us interviews."

However, said Kent, there have been efforts to prevent the members of these groups taking up a political struggle independent of the trade unions and the Labour Party. Led by the administrators of BRTUS (now renamed Parents United: Against Unsafe Schools), "There has been a watering down of demands, and the organisation no longer calls for closure of schools on the grounds of the need for a broader appeal. They have now blocked links from members of this committee and supporters of the WSWs due to criticism of the unions."

A letter of protest from the Educators Rank-And File Safety Committee to BRTUS/Parents United: Against Unsafe Schools, sent on November 25, has received no reply, and is published [here](#).

"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," Kent summarised.

Renae Cassimeda, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and a secondary school history teacher from San

Diego, gave an update on conditions in American schools:

“Firstly, conditions in the US are grim as the country enters into a third wave. Totals have reached catastrophic numbers of over 13 million reported cases and over 260,000 deaths. This is the direct result of the policy of herd immunity that is pursued by both parties as well as the unions.

“Both the Trump administration and President-elect Biden oppose any nationally coordinated lockdowns to fight the pandemic. The two main vectors of infection, schools and workplaces, are being kept open even as workers and students continue to lose their lives.

“There has been a major increase in COVID-19 cases among schools since they reopened in July. The COVID Monitor reports over 148,242 cases tied to K-12 schools, including approximately 58,000 staff. There have been hundreds of reported school employees who have died from COVID since April. At least 50 educators and students have died since schools reopened in July.

“The financial elite is celebrating a financial bonanza as they push workers back to work and throw open the schools. More than 1 trillion dollars has been gained by billionaires in the US since the pandemic began. This is the fastest accumulation in recent memory. The working class is being put to death for profit.”

Gregor Link, speaking from Germany for the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), told the meeting: “Last week, COVID-19 was the number one cause of death in Europe with almost 3,000 deaths per day. In Germany alone there are now tens of thousands of new infections each day, with more than 400 people dying.

“On the *World Socialist Web Site*, we have shown that infections at schools are covered up and are not disclosed to the public. Critical teachers are intimidated, and school administrators are put under massive pressure. Classmates of infected students are not being tested and quarantine measures are not being imposed.

“Nationwide [across Germany], 10 times as many 10-19 year-olds are infected today compared to spring. Of course, these students then potentially infect their parents and grandparents without them knowing.

“The unions support this policy by backing the government’s propaganda that children play no role in the pandemic. In contrast, Germany’s leading virologist, Christian Drosten, recently made clear once again that there is no difference between age groups in terms of infectivity.”

Link continued, “Against this policy of deliberate infection, a massive movement is beginning to develop in Germany, just as in many other countries across Europe.

“The International Youth and Students for Social Equality fight to expand these actions across all of Europe and

beyond. We say that a Europe-wide school strike must be organized to prepare the ground for a general strike. Schools and factories must be temporarily closed until the pandemic is brought under control and defeated.”

Danny Knightley, a student and representative of the IYSSE in the UK, described conditions at British universities, saying, “Over two months ago, the Tory government announced its plans to push all students to return to campuses claiming ‘there is no scientific basis that face-to-face teaching is unsafe as long as COVID-secure plans are in place.’ This was used to justify over a million students and university workers returning to campus and has since been proven to be a lie.

“Since September, the number of coronavirus cases in the UK have more than quadrupled, due to the mass migration of students around the country. University infections now stand at over 47,000...

“We [the IYSSE] call on all students and educators to form their own independent safety committees, to fight for safe working and studying conditions. These committees must also ensure the safe return home of students, without increasing the risk of transmission. Campus safety committees must then ensure, with the aid of scientists and medical experts, that there is no return to colleges and universities until the virus is genuinely suppressed and proper safety measures have been implemented.”

Claire, a 15-year-old secondary school pupil, who recently gave an interview to the WSWs along with her mother, called into the meeting. She described how she contracted the virus about a month ago and was actually encouraged not to leave school even after experiencing COVID-like symptoms. While in hospital, one of the nurses told Claire that, since the present lockdown, mainly children and teenagers had been infected. Claire told how at her unventilated school, assemblies are still held with up to 200 pupils and staff present.

Underlining the common experiences and tasks uniting students and school staff internationally, Link made the point that what Claire had described was similar to what students were reporting to the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees in Germany.

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