

Letter to Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools (BRTUS)/Parents United Against Unsafe Schools

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
2 December 2020

The following letter was sent to Parents United: Against Unsafe Schools (formerly Boycott the Return to Unsafe Schools—BRTUS) on November 25, on behalf of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. It demands the immediate overturning of bans on posts and links in their Facebook group to articles from the World Socialist Web Site and an end to the blocking of comments critical of the trade unions for sabotaging opposition to unsafe school reopenings. No response has been received.

We call on WSWs readers and supporters of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to write letters of protest in defence of democratic rights and a free discussion among parents, young people and school staff on what way forward to protect lives.

Letters should be sent to: boycottunsafeschools@gmail.com

Copies should be forwarded to: sep@socialequality.org.uk

To Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools (BRTUS)/Parents United,

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on BRTUS/Parents United to immediately overturn your ban on posts by our members and supporters. This is an undemocratic act which blocks the development of open discussion and debate on what way forward to protect children and educators under conditions of a massive escalation of coronavirus in the UK and internationally.

The removal of posts and then the blocking of accounts began after a parent, Kelly, posted a response to a parent's question about what source she had used for information about teacher deaths from COVID-19. Kelly linked a wsws.org article with the relevant information. She then received a message from Admin stating that "no articles from the wsws" will be allowed. She was blocked for 24 hours and then permanently removed when she criticised an article promoting the National Education Union. She explained that the NEU had refused to call strike action despite none of its 10 demands for the reopening of schools having been met.

There has been no public explanation by BRTUS as to why the *World Socialist Web Site* (wsws.org) is banned or why comments critical of the trade unions are not allowed. The sequence of events however establishes that this measure is aimed at censoring any criticism of the Labour and trade union bureaucracies and their criminal role in suppressing opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established in September by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) to build independent action to stop the reopening of unsafe schools. The wsws.org is the online news journal of the International Committee of the Fourth

International, of which the SEP is the British section. The wsws.org is the most widely read socialist website in the UK and internationally with over one million hits monthly. From January 2020, it has written over 1,000 articles on the impact of the pandemic, called for independent action to protect workers and young people, given voice to the concerns of broad sections of society, interviewed hundreds of individuals and supported the growth of action groups such as BRTUS as an expression of a growing independent opposition to the criminal policies of "herd immunity" the world over. It has established independent rank-and-file committees of educators as well as auto and transport workers throughout America, Europe and Australia.

Significant numbers of your readers have independently posted articles from the wsws.org as a source of information and education. These have received many favourable comments and been re-posted by your supporters. The wsws.org has interviewed Jennifer Jones, an Admin of BRTUS, on two occasions, as well as referenced the site positively in dozens of our articles. The creation of a forum for parents to protect their children from the deadly impact of the pandemic, in opposition to the government's negligent response, is a welcome development.

The WSWs publicised the Parent Strike held on November 5 and called for mass support amongst parents and teachers alike. Whilst the majority of posts by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee had been accepted up to this point, this changed immediately following the publication of an article on the WSWs on November 10 titled: "UK parents' strike sabotaged by the trade unions and Labour Party".

The article drew out the lessons of the strike and exposed the education unions' refusal to endorse it. It noted that despite the fact that schools have become a key vector in the deadly spread of the virus, the unions dropped all of their demands for "safety" in June and welcomed the reopening of schools. The article made the following key points: "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.

"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.

"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 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."

A message was sent to the WSWs immediately following the publication of this article from Jennifer Jones under the subject title, "An article re BRTUS contains some inaccuracies". She drew attention to what was described as a "statement of support" from the GMB, "sent in the members' newsletter", a £500 donation to BRTUS, and "video or written statements of support for BRTUS from MP Grahaeme [sic] Morris, Blee [sic] Ribeiro Addy, Claudia Webbe... on BRTUS website and social media pages."

Laura Tiernan, one of the co-authors of the WSWs article, replied, "I was of course aware of the MPs statements of solidarity posted on the BRTUS website and I have amended the text to make even clearer the point we were seeking to drive home: that the Labour MPs being promoted by BRTUS and Counterfire are political enemies of any genuine fight by teachers and parents.

"It costs the MPs nothing to make statements of solidarity on your website. Not a single one of them—[former Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn included—has publicly opposed [current Labour Party leader Sir Keir] Starmer's criminal support for the Johnson government's insistence that schools remain open, let alone called for strike action by parents and teachers to save lives.

"Our article correctly stated that the GMB union had posted no statement about the parents' strike on its website or social media accounts. You point to a single newsletter sent by the Yorkshire branch of GMB and a donation of £500 to BRTUS. GMB has 600,000 members and sits on funds worth an estimated £79 million. The union's General Secretary Tim Roache receives £160,000 a year in salary package. Needless to say, £500 is chicken feed to them.

"The parents' strike was a national event. Had GMB, Unite and the

education unions thrown their resources and support behind the strike, it would have won mass support. Joint strikes by parents, teachers and school staff would also have become a rallying point for broader sections of the working class being forced into unsafe workplaces, colleges and universities, not just in the UK but across Europe.

"But the unions are hostile to any such fight. GMB (including GMB Yorkshire) made no call for their members to join the strike. They have spent decades suppressing strikes and presiding over the gutting of wages, jobs and working conditions. They act as industrial fire fighters for the government and corporations to contain and hose down any eruption of workers' struggles.

"The Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* have given our full support to parents entering struggle against the Johnson government's criminally reckless reopening of schools. We recognised the importance of BRTUS and sought to amplify its message of solidarity between parents and teachers and action to protect the safety and lives of children and their families. But this support does not imply a political amnesty."

No response has been forthcoming to this email. Instead further posts from our committee and wsws.org have been blocked and removed.

The acceleration of the virus globally poses immense risks for the health and well-being of society and the necessity for urgent action. The unions and Labour are accomplices to a great crime unfolding. They are blocking the broad-based opposition that exists. Some 58 percent of parents surveyed support the closure of schools and over 50 percent of teachers. That they remain open is due to the political role the Labour Party and the trade unions have played. They subordinate the protection of lives to the profit interests of capitalism. If discussion is blocked on these key facts, then BRTUS becomes complicit in this criminal operation.

No other political tendency has been censored. The Labour Party, NEU, GMB and Unison posts are regularly promoted. Political tendencies such as the Socialist Worker, Socialist Party, Counterfire, and the People's Assembly posts are all allowed.

Workers and parents must have the right to decide which political programme and perspective they wish to adopt or discuss and debate. Blocking access to this through censorship is a reactionary tool to silence opposition.

In closing, we again call on BRTUS to immediately remove blocks and censorship of members and supporters of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the wsws.org. We will campaign broadly among BRTUS supporters and members to take up this demand.

Yours sincerely,

Tania Kent

For the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact