

UK National Education Union calls off strike over Covid safety at primary school in Merseyside

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On Tuesday, the National Education Union (NEU) called off a planned six-day strike over December and January at Kingsway Primary School in Wirral, Merseyside. More than 85 percent of NEU members at Kingsway Primary had voted to strike, which was to begin Thursday.

The action would have been the first official Covid-related strike called by the National Education Union (NEU), as pressure from educators and parents mounts to close unsafe schools.

Against scientific opinion that schools, like other workplaces, are major vectors for the spread of coronavirus, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's ruling Conservatives insist they remain open. This has contributed to 76,000 unnecessary deaths, including 148 educators, and led to utter chaos in schools. The catastrophic death rate is set to soar since the government ended the national lockdown on December 2, to enable bumper profits in the run-up to Christmas.

The trade unions, as well as the opposition Labour Party, are operating as accomplices of the government, and recently sabotaged an unofficial parents' strike demanding school closures during lockdown.

Staff at Kingsway Primary have been up in arms for months, accusing the school leadership of ignoring their safety concerns. During the May to the July summer break, they were unable to ensure even minimal safety standards and basic hygiene for pupils. Inadequate water pressure, which was not rectified, rendered pupils and staff unable to wash their hands.

Schoolsweek reported one teacher saying, "Children were... walking through different areas of the school having not washed their hands. We were concerned about the spread of the virus and the safety of our pupils."

Another staff member told *Birkenhead News*, "There were issues with the water system in school... Children had no working taps in their bubbles and when they flushed the toilets the sinks didn't work. Staff toilets didn't flush and

[we] had to use a bucket to flush [them]. Health and safety issues like this just aren't acceptable. Especially now."

Other issues raised since the beginning of term in September include the way coronavirus "bubbles" (an ineffectual strategy that supposedly, but doesn't, enable social distancing between groups of children) and infection outbreaks are managed. Staff at the school recovering from cancer, or the clinically vulnerable due to acute respiratory disease, were reportedly denied risk assessments to prevent them being sent to work from home.

The NEU have been aware of fundamental breaches in hygiene and safety at the school—met with an inadequate complaints' procedures on the part of school management—for as long as five months. Prior to the union calling the strike off, NEU Regional Secretary Peter Middleman said, "The issues came to our attention in the spring... and it became apparent that the staff were expressing some frustration at the [school] management which had crystallised around sanitation and hygiene and the availability of washing facilities."

Rather than mobilising its members, the union bent over backwards to avoid industrial action, including submitting a dispute resolution document to employers. "We remain very keen to avoid this dispute at all costs, but the ball is in the employer's court," continued Middleman.

According to Wirral NEU Branch Secretary Ian Harris, "Members have been raising concerns since May 2020, sadly these went unresolved... and ample opportunity has been provided to resolve the concerns... The formal ballot [for strike action] is the culmination of a series of complaints that have gone to the school and Wirral Council.

"Clearly, an improvement in the working conditions for staff will lead to better learning conditions for the children."

This is a lie. Neither working conditions for staff nor learning conditions for children—continually disrupted as infections break out—can improve until rudimentary public health measures are implemented. This demands the

immediate closure of Kingsway Primary school, along with all other schools nationally, as well as fully resourced online learning.

As things stand, both staff and pupils are subject to unspeakable stresses and dangers from the deadly virus, all because the government and corporations insist that parents go to work to produce profits and expose themselves and others to suffering the same fate.

After a new interim headteacher was appointed at Kingsway Primary, the employer contacted the NEU which agreed to call off the strike. According to Ian Harris, “The school have now considered a proposed framework agreement to resolve our industrial dispute. The agreement has been endorsed by the new interim headteacher and it sets out a foundation for a more democratic and safer workplace.”

Announcing the sell-out, Bora Oktas, regional officer of the NEU, said, “Our members at Kingsway Primary School have suspended strike action as an acknowledgement of good faith that the new headteacher has shown by signing an enabling agreement. The employer should not take our members’ flexibility for granted; unless there is early progress in implementing the terms of resolution document in the coming weeks, our members will reinstate the strike action as planned in January.”

Who is he trying to kid? The NEU has sold out another struggle and its record shows that it will not reinstate anything.

Epitomising the collaboration of the NEU and all unions in keeping schools and the economy open since the end of the initial lockdown in June, Oktas continued, “We congratulate our Kingsway members on behalf of everyone in the NEU. I take particular pride in the fact that our members, who have worked tirelessly to protect the pupils and vulnerable staff in the school during these difficult times of Covid, have delivered quality education and care for pupils at Kingsway Primary.”

The education unions including the NEU, NAHT, GMB, Unison and Unite, are doing everything possible to suppress growing demands for industrial action at individual schools in case this spreads throughout the education sector and beyond.

Just days before calling off the Kingsway Primary strike, Wirral Unison called off scheduled action against pay cuts at Woodchurch Road Primary School in Oxton. Play workers and 21 teaching assistants (TAs) had voted for a one-day strike over plans to cut their hours and pay by up to 20 percent—as much as £3,885 in pay per year.

Unison suspended the strike at the start of December after Wirral Council dropped the pay cut for six play workers but only delayed the decision on pay for 15 TAs until next July.

Last month, the NEU announced its Escalation App, providing teachers a checklist to track concerns about Covid-19 safety. The union suggests staff can withdraw their labour under Section 44 of the Health and Safety Act if concerns are ignored. Alternatively, they are told to approach the union for a strike ballot.

The App is a pretence that the union is addressing safety concerns and a means to monitor the growing anger and frustration among educators.

When action becomes unavoidable, the union bureaucracy calculate that they may have to sanction a ballot to prevent their members acting independently to better enforce a sell-out. Such was the case at Kingsway Primary. The unions have no fundamental differences with Johnson’s herd immunity policy, premised on the insistence that the “economy” and profits come first so schools and workplaces must stay open.

This has led to a disastrous situation in which there have been infections at thousands of schools. The Department for Education revealed at the start of December that on November 19 there were 798,000 pupils absent from school for Covid related reasons.

The suppression of class struggle was expressed in the National Association of Headteachers’ (NAHT) recent appeal to the government to permit schools to switch to remote learning before they break up for Christmas.

Fearing an independent movement of parents keeping children at home, NAHT General Secretary Paul Whiteman, as reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, said, “School leaders are concerned that there will be a further and potentially steep drop in attendance figures next week, as families are forced to decide for themselves how long to isolate before getting together at Christmas.”

Educators at Kingsway must reject the NEU’s attempt to end their dispute. An organisation that cannot even fight for the basic right to running water in schools will fight for nothing. To conduct an effective struggle for safety in the workplace demands a rebellion against the unions and the building of workers rank-and file safety committees. We urge educators, parents and students 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 WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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