

As pandemic rages

Johnson government forces London schools to remain open

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London's Greenwich council has backed down from its decision to ask schools in the borough to close and move to online learning.

The retreat by the Labour Party-run council was what should have been expected in the face of legal action threatened by the Conservative government. It underscores the urgent need for an independent struggle of teachers, parents and pupils to combat the pandemic.

Greenwich council announced their plan Sunday evening and were followed on Monday by fellow Labour councils in the London boroughs of Islington and Waltham Forest. Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan then wrote an open letter calling on the government to close all secondary schools and colleges in the capital. Schools nationally are scheduled to close for the Christmas holidays at the end of this week, with the government giving headteachers the option to take the Friday off.

The dangers posed by keeping schools open worsen by the day.

London has been leading a renewed national surge of infections since the partial November national lockdown was ended. Education settings are one of the primary vectors of COVID-19 in the capital, particularly those with pupils aged 10 to 19. In the last week, already high infection rates in this age group increased by 75 percent. Case numbers are exploding just days before children return home for the Christmas holidays and multiple households are free to mix for a five-day period.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government continues to enforce a murderous "herd immunity" policy, keeping workplaces and schools open so that nothing interferes with the regular extraction of profits by the corporations. Schools act as vital holding pens for children, allowing parents to work and shop.

On Monday, schools minister Nick Gibb wrote to every school in Greenwich and Islington demanding they stay open. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson declared, "It is

simply not in children's best interests for schools in Greenwich, Islington or elsewhere to close their doors.

"That's why I won't hesitate to do what is right for young people and have issued a direction to Greenwich Council setting out that they must withdraw the letter issued to head teachers on Sunday."

Williamson, who could not possibly care less about children, issued his "temporary continuity direction" under the draconian provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020, passed with Labour support and without debate in March on the pretext of combatting COVID-19 and now used to order children and school workers into danger. Williamson threatened a court injunction if Greenwich council did not comply. Schools in Islington and Waltham Forest were sent a second letter yesterday by Gibb instructing them to stay open.

On Tuesday morning, Greenwich council leader Danny Thorpe released a statement reiterating that the council "cannot agree that this is the correct choice for our schools" but agreeing to "ask our schools to keep their doors open". This, Thorpe said, was because he could not "justify the use of public funds to fight the decision in the courts."

The next few paragraphs pointed to the deadly consequences of schools remaining open. Thorpe continued, "Officers advised me that new cases in Royal Greenwich 'are significantly higher than we have recorded on previous weeks, an approximate 40-50% increase'. At that time, there were 3,670 children in self isolation and 314 teaching staff... "That information continues to worsen.

"On Monday, an additional 498 children went into self-isolation and the latest data we have showed a further rise in numbers."

These events confirm the Socialist Equality Party's insistence that the coronavirus pandemic is not primarily a medical crisis, but a political one.

The resources exist to contain the virus and keep its impact on the health of the population to a tiny fraction of the

damage it has been allowed to inflict—especially given the development of several vaccines to be rolled out in the weeks and months ahead.

But the social interests of the super-rich, who direct government policy and who demand that economic life continue as normal, mean not even the most minimal life-saving action—an additional *three days* of school closures in *three boroughs*—can be tolerated. The full might of the state is employed to prevent any step back from the Tories’ “herd immunity” policy which would raise questions about its deadly consequences.

The political struggle necessary for decisive action in schools against the pandemic requires, above all, breaking the suffocating grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. It is not a question of a legal battle to convince Johnson’s viciously right-wing government of the error of its ways, but of organising the working class to save lives, in opposition to Labour and the education unions that function as Johnson’s partners in crime.

None of the councils seeking to close schools nor Sadiq Khan mentioned, let alone openly challenged, the Labour leadership’s support for schools being kept open. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer wrote in the *Daily Mail* in August, “I don’t just want all our children back in school, I expect it. No ifs, no buts”. He told LBC on Monday, “I’m very reluctant to close our schools” and called the government’s cynical offer to schools to close a day early “smart”. Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office Rachel Reeves told *Sky News*, “Schools should be the last things to close.”

The education unions hold the power to close schools across the country, significantly reducing the rate of infection and saving tens of thousands of lives, including among their members and their families. But the National Association of Headteacher (NAHT), Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Education Union (NEU) have done everything possible to dragoon teachers and pupils into the classrooms.

Just days before Greenwich council made its initial closure announcement, the NEU called off the only case of strike action over COVID-19 safety fears that has succeeded in making its way through the union’s interminable “escalation” process. Kingsway Primary School in Wirral, Merseyside, was due to begin strike action last Thursday over, among other things, a lack of running water. This was halted by the NEU based on a pledge by a newly appointed headteacher to listen to complaints.

The NEU’s national executive committee voted on November 12 in a closed-doors meeting against a ballot of its over 450,000 members for country-wide industrial action over unsafe conditions.

Responding to Greenwich council’s initial decision, Joint

General Secretary of the NEU Kevin Courtney said, “We strongly welcome the decision by Greenwich Council to urge all of its schools to close from Monday evening, to all except vulnerable children and the children of key workers. We urge other councils to take the same decision.

“The Government should have been planning for this weeks ago. They have now started to recognise the blindingly obvious fact that transmission is happening in schools and that this can spread to families. But the Government now needs to act.”

If it was “blindingly obvious” that the government should have done something “weeks ago”, why did the NEU not call on its members to strike? Why does it still not call on teachers to act, but only Labour councils and the government? The government has acted by insisting schools stay open. Yet still Mary Bousted, the NEU’s other joint general secretary, pleads that “ministers should be supporting heads to make professional judgements on the safety, or otherwise, of their schools remaining open.”

The NEU, like every other union and the Labour Party, are the frontline political police working to ensure that the costs of the pandemic are borne by the working class and not the corporations. If the necessary urgent action is to be taken to prevent another catastrophic loss of life, it must be taken independently of these rotten pro-capitalist organisations by school workers and students across the country, in a collective struggle by the entire working class, based on a socialist programme and led by the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP’s Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all school workers, parents and pupils to contact us and begin organising the fight to close schools and provide fully resourced remote instruction and care until they can be safely reopened.



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