

Scottish government and unions refuse to extend holiday break despite teachers' demands

Steve James

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) government, local authorities and teaching unions are working to ensure all schools in Scotland remain fully open until the end of this term and thereafter. This is to allow the greatest profits to be made, particularly from the crucial Christmas sales period, regardless of the consequences for public health and teachers' lives.

The SNP government is also opposing any version of blended learning, a mixture of online attendance and social distanced in-school learning, to be implemented in schools prior to the end of term on December 22 or 23.

In a letter to the Scottish parliament's education and skills committee, Education Secretary John Swinney claimed, without evidence, that "there would be less transmission of Covid-19 through children and young people being in school than mixing out of school".

In response, an open letter circulated widely in social media and reported in the press pointed to the immense pressures and dangers teachers confront. Addressed to Swinney and written by primary teacher Elaine Robinson on behalf of Glasgow Southside Teachers and Support for Learning Workers, the letter explained:

"In my own school, over the past 4 weeks, 3 full classes, their teachers and support for learning workers have had to isolate because of COVID 19 cases. That's approximately 90 children and 6 members of staff. Over the past 4 months there have been regular individual isolations of 2 weeks in every class in response to Track and Trace."

The letter asked Swinney directly:

"When did teachers and support staff suddenly become 2nd class citizens? When did we suddenly become babysitters accommodating the childcare of

workers? When did we become the only profession who are expected to work in environments with risk and have to provide our own PPE to protect ourselves?

"To absolutely make sure we all felt as devalued as possible, the request for a small extension to the Christmas break was rejected. Not only have we devoted time to developing blended learning materials, we had all fully prepared to deliver remote learning opportunities from the 6th to 11th of January. Again you say this is to protect the learning journey and ensure childcare provision for key workers. I ask you then—how do we ensure our families are safe?"

In every country on the planet the ruling class has insisted that schools must be opened to ensure that workers can make profits for big business.

In response to the letter, a Scottish government spokesperson cynically claimed that "no current direct evidence that transmission within schools plays a significant contributory role in driving increased rates of infection among children and [Office for National Statistics] data has shown no evidence of any difference between the positivity rates of teachers and other school staff, relative to other worker groups of a similar age."

The ONS interpretation relied on by the SNP administration has been discredited. Two recent reports have underscored the dangers of in school transmission denied by the governments in Edinburgh and London.

One, from Independent SAGE, made up of scientists critical of the government's pandemic policy, brought out that between September 1 and November 16 infection rates in schools soared by a factor of 54. Another, from Imperial College London, studied the second national lockdown November 24. It found that infection rates increased among school-aged children

throughout but fell among all other age groups. Schools remained open throughout this period.

The main teaching union, the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS), has eventually had to admit the dangers faced by teachers. An EIS survey found that only 31 percent of teachers felt safe in the classroom and 66 percent indicated support for industrial action, including strikes, against the government's refusal to allow remote or blended learning in Level 4 lockdown areas. Scotland has five tiers of lockdown, with Level 4 the highest and 0 the lowest.

The EIS is acutely aware of the immense frustration, fear and anger building up among teachers at the dangers they confront. To prevent this resulting in educators taking their own steps, outside the control of the trade union, the EIS has mounted a stalling operation. This aims to give the pretence of activity and responding to teachers' concerns while seeking to ensure nothing is done, and that the schools remain open.

The dangers posed by re-opening schools has been immediately apparent to anyone willing to honestly appraise the situation. Yet it was November 22 before EIS General Secretary Larry Flanagan conceded, "Put simply, leaving schools out of any Level 4 restrictions, weakens the impact of virus suppression." Flanagan warned the government the EIS was prepared to ballot its members but (of course) "we would prefer not to reach that point."

On December 3, the Scottish government announced that proposals for an extended Christmas break, beginning December 18 and running until January 11, had been rejected. In response, Flanagan called for "lateral flow tests" to be made available to school staff. Lateral flow tests, trialed in Liverpool and other areas with a high concentration of COVID-19 cases, generate quick results, but are viewed as less accurate than swab tests.

Only on December 10, one day before the Level 4 restrictions were due to end, did the local EIS association in Glasgow finally open a ballot of its members. But this was not a ballot to immediately close the schools. According to the EIS website, a 'Yes' vote would give the union a mandate to, in due course, "declare a dispute" with SNP-run Glasgow City Council. Sometime thereafter the EIS might consider a "further consultative ballot" on industrial action.

In other words, nothing will be done. Another six local branches announced they were holding similar ballots.

The EIS, using a tried tactic of every union bureaucracy, are attempting to drag matters out as long as possible before conceding any further steps, which they will then seek to negate, regardless of the cost in COVID-19 cases and lives.

The EIS also launched a #NotAtAllCosts social media campaign. The purpose of this is to restrict educators to a tactic of waiting for moral pressure on the SNP government. Launching the campaign Flanagan issued a letter to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon concluding with no demands at all. Rather, he hoped that "moving forward your Government does more to acknowledge, and address, the real fear and anxieties which exist in schools, than has been the case to date, especially when we have areas operating at Level 4."

Ballot results from three areas were announced December 15. Fully 91 percent of teachers supported declaring a dispute in West Dunbartonshire. 93 percent in Glasgow and 90 percent supported the move in Fife. Turnouts were between 53 and 75 percent. The figures prove there is immense willingness to take up a struggle among teachers.

Closing schools and universities while providing sufficient resources to avoid unnecessary disruption of young people's education is a matter of life and death. Teachers, educators, parents and school students in Scotland, Britain and internationally can place no confidence whatsoever in the trade unions. Taking up a struggle on these vital issues depends on the development of a movement independent of the trade unions and seeking the broadest mobilisation in the working class.



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