

Build action committees to oppose a return to UK schools and campuses in January!

Statement of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee:
23 December 2020

The government's admission that a new more virulent strain of COVID-19 is sweeping out of control throughout the UK and impacts children "more effectively" demands independent action by educators to ensure that all schools, colleges and universities stay closed in the New Year.

Tens and thousands more lives are at risk. There must be no faith placed in the government and its criminal accomplices within the Labour Party and trade unions to do what is necessary to prevent mass deaths. The dire situation confronting workers and their children is the direct result of the government's policy of "herd immunity"—refusing to do anything to contain the coronavirus that might cut across the profit drive of the major corporations.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the grotesquely misnamed "Health" Secretary Matt Hancock and Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield have long insisted that "schools are the safest place for children to be," "children rarely get the virus", are not vectors and only get "mild symptoms." There is nothing left of this tissue of lies.

Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London explained this week, "During the lockdown in England, we saw a general shift in the age distribution of the virus towards children, and that was true in the variant and non-variant and that is what we would expect, given that we had locked down which reduced adult contacts but schools were still open.

"But what we've seen over the course of a five-or six-week period is consistently the proportion of pillar two cases for the variant in under-15s was statistically significantly higher than the non-variant virus."

That infections among children 11-17 were the highest in any age group has been known since November, when children aged 0-17 recorded 50

percent of infections. On December 15, there was a 65-fold increase in child infections since the beginning of September and a 50 percent increase over the previous week. Child admissions to hospital for Covid-19 also rose to 2,787 with 32 overnight on December 21 and there were 772 new admissions since the end of the limited national lockdown in November.

A monumental crime is being carried out against children and educators. Whatever temporary measures are cobbled together--between the government, the Labour Party and the education trade unions for the new term beginning January 4, will be for the sole purpose of preventing an explosion of popular anger so the agenda of the ruling class to protect its obscene wealth continues to dominate.

The ruling class cares nothing for the protection of workers. The government claims it was not informed of the new strain by the scientific community until December 14. But this was the same day that Education Secretary Gavin Williamson threatened legal action against three London councils, Greenwich, Islington and Waltham Forest, unless they reversed their instructions that schools in their areas close a few days earlier for Christmas.

On December 17, hours before schools were due to shut for the Christmas break, the government announced it had "new information" that the more infectious strain of COVID-19 was leading to a major surge in infections. It announced a staggered start for secondary schools for the first week in January and a roll out "mass testing" of children. Its response to the "alarming new evidence" was to call for volunteers in their tens of thousands to go to schools, the epicentre of infections, to administer these tests!

It then announced on Monday that it is "considering" a delay to the opening of schools. Given that ministers

have repeatedly said schools would be “the last thing to close”, this confirms how dangerous the situation is and that the government knows a lot more than it is telling us.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer now complains that the government failed to “act quick enough” to contain the virus, before pledging his full backing for “whatever tighter restrictions” are imposed. But he wants everyone to forget that he also supported every previous relaxation of restrictions by Johnson and infamously insisted that schools must remain open, “no ifs, no buts, no equivocations.”

The education unions have admitted they were fully aware of the consequences of allowing the reopening of schools. Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), stated, "The rising infection rates amongst secondary pupils has been alarming and mass testing has been necessary for many months." But during these months the NEU also insisted schools remained open—even without safety measures such as social distancing, or personal protective equipment for staff and children. They have now called for a totally ineffective and worthless two week move to online learning in January to prepare for a Tory Covid-testing regime that will be used to argue for schools to be kept open.

These forces are jointly responsible for the policy of death inflicted on the working class.

Only the Socialist Equality Party has consistently opposed the reopening of schools and warned of the dangers, forming the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in September.

The SEP produced a statement as early as May 30, demanding, “No to the reopening of schools! Build action committees to safeguard children and teachers!” It explained, “The reopening of schools has nothing to do with genuine concern for the education and wellbeing of children. Teachers, children and even toddlers are being sent into unsafe environments that will become a breeding ground for COVID-19. The youngest and least able to follow safety measures are being packed off to school first as the lynchpin of the government’s ‘back to work’ drive. Schools are being treated as little more than holding pens so that millions of parents can be sent to work in non-essential industries...

“Education workers and parents must now act

independently by forming action committees to ensure the safety and well-being of children, staff, families, and communities.”

Our warnings are being tragically confirmed. The protection of children and educators can only develop as part of an independent movement of the working class in a struggle against the capitalist profit system, which sacrifices the safety and basic needs of workers to the profit drive of the ruling elite.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all educators, parents, students and pupils to prepare to oppose the return to schools and campuses in January! Action committees must be formed in every educational institution, independent from the pro-business trade unions, to take up the struggle against the Johnson government and its Labour allies. A fight must begin now for the following demands:

- All non-essential production must be shut down immediately.
- All schools and universities must be closed to in-person learning with immediate effect.
- All education workers must be paid a full salary and millions must be provided to ensure proper online learning for all.
- This must be paid for by seizing the assets and mega-profits of the major corporations and banks.
- The fight for this programme demands the political mobilisation of the entire working class in the struggle for socialism.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a coordinating meeting on January 3 to plan the action needed to close schools and campuses. To take part e-mail us at sep@socialequality.org.uk

We are holding an online public forum on January 9 at 2pm. We call on all educators, parents, students and pupils to register to participate and distribute the link to this meeting as widely as possible.

The coming days and weeks are critical. The action that workers take now can save tens of thousands of lives.



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