

With 4,500 deaths in just eight days and nearly 400,000 new Covid cases

UK teaching unions call for no work in “unsafe schools” as opposition among educators mounts

Robert Stevens
3 January 2021

Deaths from COVID-19 and new cases of the disease surged in the UK over the holiday period. The 454 deaths announced yesterday took the tally in the last eight days to 4,588. Over the same period, just under 400,000 new cases were detected. Almost 55,000 cases were announced yesterday, with over 50,000 cases announced daily over the previous five days.

Hospitals in major cities are now so full of Covid cases that patients are having to be treated in ambulances on arrival or being sent elsewhere. According to a leaked National Health Service (NHS) email obtained by Sky News, intensive care units in three London hospitals—North Middlesex University Hospital, Barnet Hospital and Whittington Hospital—were “full” on New Year's Eve. This left patients waiting to be transferred to other hospitals for critical care.

Boris Johnson's Conservative government has pursued a policy of herd immunity throughout the pandemic, allowing 2,654,779, people to be infected with the loss of over 75,000 lives according to official figures, and around 90,000 when Covid is mentioned on the death certificate. Today it is urging primary schools throughout England to reopen after the Christmas holiday.

Schools have been a major vector for the spread of COVID-19, worsened by a new and more contagious variant of the disease. Despite this, Johnson stressed on Sunday's BBC *Andrew Marr Show* that parents should send their children to school in all areas of England where they are open. His government views schools as holding pens that enable parents to go to work and keep the profits rolling in.

Mass resistance to this murderous policy is growing and pressure from educators and parents, mainly organised on social media, has forced a crisis ridden and widely hated government to make several U-turns, including delaying the reopening of secondary schools until January 18.

London and the surrounding county of Essex are at the epicentre of the disease in Britain. On Saturday, the government announced that all primary schools (children from four and 11) in London must remain closed at the start of the term. Previously it had insisted only those primaries in 22 of London's 32 boroughs would be affected by closures. Primaries in 27 other local authorities in the UK have also been told to close for an indefinite period, meaning a million children will not return.

On Sunday, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, who on New Year's Eve declared, “We are absolutely confident that all schools are returning,” said that secondary schools in England may remain closed for weeks beyond the scheduled mid-January return date.

Forced to note the national mood—with one opinion poll showing that he would lose a general election and even his own seat—Johnson told Marr, “It may be that we need to do things in the next few weeks that may be tougher.” Even so Johnson continued to lie, declaring that “I understand people's anxieties, but there is no doubt in my mind schools are safe.”

The government's own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies said the opposite on December 22 and December 31. Appearing on the same show, SAGE adviser Professor Mark Walport said the new variant of

COVID-19 has “transmitted more readily in younger age groups as well. It is going to be very difficult to keep it under control without much tighter social restrictions. We know that a person between 12 and 16 is seven times more likely than others in a household to bring the infection into a household.”

Laura Duffel, a matron at a London hospital, told the BBC’s Radio Five Live Saturday, “We’ve have children coming in and it was minimally affecting children in the first wave... we now have a whole ward of children here. I know that some of my colleagues are in a similar position where they have whole wards of children with Covid.”

The number of educators dying from Covid is also increasing. Among recent deaths are Paul Hilditch, a 55-year-old who taught engineering and technology at Conyers School in Yarm, North Yorkshire; Michael Haigh, a 60-year-old school site worker; Lynne Morgan, a learning support assistant at Christ the King College on the Isle of Wight, and Michele Cockrill, a 62-year-old teaching assistant and mother of two from Sittingborne, Kent.

In a particularly tragic case, the *Daily Mirror* reported Saturday that an entire five-member family was struck down with coronavirus after one their children, aged 12, contracted the disease after returning to school in September. The disease took the life of his grandmother, Maria Rico.

The terrible toll taken by the pandemic is the political responsibility of the trade unions and Labour Party, which have collaborated with the Tories throughout in reopening the economy and forcing educators and students back into schools, colleges and universities.

Mounting popular opposition has forced a change of tack.

On Saturday, the National Education Union (NEU), which had previously only called for a delay in reopening secondary schools to allow for the testing of pupils, issued fresh advice to its half a million members. Avoiding any mention of industrial action, the NEU wrote that it is “in our view, unsafe for you to attend the workplace at present... The NEU’s advice is that you should decide to advise your head teacher or principal that you will not be attending the workplace but will be available to work remotely from home.”

The NEU called on members to fill in a model letter telling their employers that under relevant health and safety regulation, “I am exercising my contractual right not to attend an unsafe place of work.”

While declaring that it is “completely committed to

ensuring that children can return to school as quickly as possible,” the 300,000 strong National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers stated Saturday that it now supported the “immediate move to remote education for all schools,” as it was “abundantly clear that the pandemic is seriously impacting on the ability of all schools to continue to operate normally.”

The National Association of Head Teachers, previously among the staunchest in insisting that schools stay open, declared, “We are calling upon government to remove people in schools from the physical harm caused by the current progress of the disease.” It planned to advise members that they should not discipline any teachers who refuse to come into work.

The main public sector union, Unison, which has more than 350,000 members in the education sector, including many classroom assistants, and the GMB general union, took the same position.

The unions are seeking to head off a rebellion by their members. The scale of opposition was indicated by the 100,000-strong attendance at an online NEU meeting, called to discuss the crisis, Sunday morning.

The same political calculations led Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who infamously said that schools must be re-opened, “no ifs, no buts” in September, to insist yesterday that “the virus is clearly out of control”, and that it was necessary to “bring in... restrictions now, national restrictions, within the next 24 hours.”

All educators must be aware from their past record that as soon as is practical, the unions will work with Labour and the Tories to herd children and staff back into school. According to ITV News Political Correspondent Dan Hewit, Starmer does not want a full lockdown as in March, but a limited “circuit breaker” as was carried out in November, with a senior Labour Party source telling him that schools should be “the last to close”.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, is organising the fight to close schools and campuses. 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 critical meeting as widely as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact