

As UK death toll mounts, Corbyn and teaching unions suppress opposition to Johnson government's murderous policies

Julie Hyland
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The UK reported 1,325 coronavirus deaths yesterday and 68,053 new infections, both record numbers. The official death toll now stands at 79,833.

Earlier in the day, a senior adviser in the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) warned that in reality up to 150,000 people are being infected with the virus every day. Mayor of London Sadiq Khan declared a "major incident" in London and warned that the virus was "out of control".

There are currently 50 percent more people in hospital in the UK with COVID-19 than at the peak of the first wave last April.

Under these appalling conditions, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has implemented a third national lockdown—more limited than the restrictions imposed last spring—motivated not by concerns for public health but fear of growing social anger.

In the 48-hours before Johnson announced the lockdown, educators, parents and students made clear their opposition to the ongoing insistence that unsafe schools remain open. On January 2, 100,000 people listened in to a National Education Union (NEU) executive meeting to see what, if anything, it intended to do about plans to reopen schools fully on January 4. The union advised its members to inform "your head teacher or principal that you will not be attending the workplace but will be available to work remotely from home."

The following day, an NEU members' meeting was attended online by 400,000 people.

That afternoon Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer called on Prime Minister Boris Johnson to implement a new lockdown within 24 hours. Starmer, who has consistently reinforced the government's insistence that schools remain open—"no ifs, no buts, no exceptions"—again refused to call for school closures, while acknowledging that "many will be closed..."

Although the NEU insisted that what was taking place was not a strike, Starmer and the Labour and trade union

bureaucracy knew in which direction the wind was blowing. The next morning, hundreds of schools were wholly or partially closed as educators refused to work in unsafe workplaces, and parents kept their children away.

Faced with mass walkouts and boycotts that could spread to other sections of workers, Johnson announced a third lockdown. But this is only to try and contain opposition, especially as the National Health Service is overwhelmed by COVID infections and deaths, while continuing to enforce a back to work agenda. The list of those deemed "essential workers" has been extended so that many schools are functioning at high capacity, while nurseries and Special Educational Needs schools are fully open. Schools have been told they cannot limit numbers.

As the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee warned in its call for independent action, "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."

Johnson, abetted by Starmer, has only been able to carry out this manoeuvre thanks to the role played by the "left" in the Labour Party and trade unions.

This was shown clearly in the online meeting organised by Parents4safereturn. Held on the eve of Johnson's announcement, it featured National Education Union joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney and former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Clearly feeling the pressure from the mass attendance at the NEU meetings, Courtney pleaded that his union had done everything to keep schools open. "My union supported the opening of schools in September [2020]," he said, in favour of "pressing the government to put in place measures to make schools safe, more COVID secure."

This support for school reopenings was critical to the enabling the virus' spread. According to the *Sunday Times*, as schools returned in September and tens of thousands of students began moving across the country to take up university placements, Downing Street was hosting leading proponents of herd immunity.

On September 20, 2020, Professor Sunetra Gupta, Professor Carl Heneghan and Swedish epidemiologist Anders Tegnell addressed cabinet. All are leading proponents of herd immunity, with Gupta co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration, a pseudo-scientific justification for letting the virus rip that is partly funded by right-wing billionaire Charles Koch.

Courtney admitted the NEU knew that government claims to have made schools safe were lies. "We knew across the whole of last term [i.e. from September] that wasn't the case." By the end of December, the case rate among secondary school students "had gone up by 75 times... by 7,500 percent," with secondary and primary school pupils the highest demographic for infection rates, he said.

As a result, "across last term we had huge numbers of children who weren't in school. In secondary schools in Rotherham [South Yorkshire] the average attendance on any day was 70 percent, so 30 percent were not in school because they had been a close contact of someone with the virus. In Sandwell [Birmingham], in the last week of November, only 36 percent of children were in school. 64 percent weren't in school because they had been a close contact of someone with the virus."

The NEU—along with the other teaching unions—still insisted schools remain open. Despite Courtney's claim that the unions had belatedly argued for a new lockdown, school rotas and "more masks", they kept up the pretence that schools could be made safe, while closing-down action taken by their members.

A strike over COVID safety at Kingsway Primary School in Wirral, Merseyside was called off by the NEU, which proceeded to junk its supposed "5 tests" for the safe reopening of schools and calls for social distancing and protections for vulnerable staff. At every stage it refused to mobilise opposition among its 500,000-strong membership, in favour of letter writing to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson. Only in the last week of the school term in December did the unions propose an early break, which was rejected.

Courtney revealed that a paper by SAGE, the government's own scientific advisory body, saying that school closures were necessary to have any chance of bringing infections down, was delivered to Johnson on December 22 but was not published until December 31. Even so, Courtney told the meeting that the teaching unions are still pinning their hopes

on Johnson and Williamson "listening to the science" so that they can "work with us, work with my union, on methods that can restart education safely..."

Corbyn backed this approach, thanking the NEU and teaching unions for working "sensibly, seriously and collaboratively" throughout. He recalled that, while he was still Labour leader, at the start of the pandemic, "we were getting this nonsense... about herd immunity, from apparently serious people in government and serious people advising government."

At the time, Corbyn concealed these discussions with Tories in which they explicitly stated their murderous policy. He only revealed them after he had made way for Starmer in April.

Then, he correctly described this policy as "eugenic", a fascistic policy aimed at eliminating large sections of the working class, especially the most vulnerable. That he chooses now to replace his definition with that of "nonsense" is aimed at concealing the real purpose of government policy. Corbyn said "herd immunity works—it kills", as if that was not the intended purpose of government inaction.

His anodyne statements to the meeting were directed to a call for "properly funded public services", and support for the "unions, mutual aid groups, volunteers and professionals that have brought us through all of this." "Post-COVID," he said, "let's not just defend, let's expand" the public sector.

To talk of "post-COVID" when more and more workers, their families and children are becoming infected and dying, overburdened hospitals are preparing rationing measures, and the rich get even richer, is a wretched justification for the government's policy of malign neglect.

Containing the virus, protecting public health and providing for the millions left without income depends on the independent intervention of the working class, as part of a global, socialist strategy. All those looking for a way forward should attend the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee online meeting this Saturday, January 9 to discuss and organise for these urgent measures.



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