

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee warns of packed schools amid an escalating pandemic and third lockdown

Our reporter
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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met last Saturday under conditions of a pandemic escalating out of control. The UK has the highest death rate in the world, with a catastrophic 1,325 daily deaths reported immediately prior to the meeting and now totalling over 95,000. Hospitals are days away from being overwhelmed.

Special needs teacher Tania Kent explained, “the belated and misnamed ‘national lockdown’” announced January 5 “will have little impact in the surge of infections. The new variant of Covid is taking prisoner after prisoner in a one-sided battle.

“After months of claims that ‘schools are the safest place that children could be,’ Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced declare that not only are schools not safe, but they are the main vector for the escalation of the virus and specifically the new variant.

“Faced with mass walkouts and boycotts that could spread to other sections of workers, Johnson announced a third lockdown—to contain opposition while continuing to enforce a back to work agenda...

“Schools, however, are packed with children... between 40 and 60 percent of pupils attending,” because the “list of those deemed ‘essential workers’ has been extended, while nurseries and Special Educational Needs schools are fully open. Schools have been told they cannot limit numbers. Children who do not have access to a laptop have been told they can return to school.

“The National Education Union [NEU] agreed to abandon their members in early years and special schools [which are open]. The mandate of its members to close schools to protect lives is being overturned!

“The NEU, NASUWT and Unison trade unions have called for another letter writing campaign. They have called on the government to ‘clarify’ and provide a more ‘precise definition’ of key worker and the vulnerable. Meanwhile the virus is allowed to run rampant within schools and communities and no call for walkouts or industrial action.”

Kent ended by calling for a “political rebellion” against the unions. “New organs of struggle must be built which fight for policies that defend the health and welfare of workers and not the profits of the rich.”

“The time has come for workers and educators to intervene on the basis of an independent programme—to take matters out of the hands of the criminally negligent Conservative government and its accomplices in the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy.

“An immediate walkout must be organised”, she said and “the closure of all non-essential industries. All education workers must be paid a full salary and millions provided to ensure proper online learning—paid for by seizing the 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 pandemic is both a political and a global crisis. It cannot be tackled on a national basis. International Youth Students for Social Equality member Gregor Link from Germany said, “An independent intervention of the working class is required to save countless lives.

“Germany internationally has been hailed as a model for how to cope with the pandemic,” but, “The German elite acted in an entirely criminal manner...

“Germany is leading Europe when it comes to the number of COVID deaths” with “more than 1,000 deaths for many days ... the pandemic is raging out of control. This is a result of the policy of leaving schools and daycare centres open ... The German government has not closed one single factory or office. The situation resembles a major war. Many crematoriums are overwhelmed by the amount of dead bodies. Clinics and hospitals are nearing collapse.

“But education ministers and state prime ministers of all parties are determined to get back to face to face teaching ‘as soon as possible’.

“Leading virologists and epidemiologists are warning that the novel strain may become dominant in all European countries, unless ‘there is a total lockdown across all Europe’. The only force able to realise this is the international working class. Governments, including unions, are opposed to all such steps.”

SEP member and teaching assistant (TA) Harvey Thompson spoke about the deaths of educators from COVID-19 and the

coverup of the figures to facilitate the government's unsafe opening of schools.

"The twitter page ToryFibs released the names of eight educators who had died of COVID-19 in schools in the recent period. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has not updated its published data since June, showing 148 education workers in the UK had died of COVID-19."

Ruth, a teacher from the Isle of Wight, explained that she has been doing research into how many educators and pupils have died from COVID. "It is being covered up in the UK. I've found out that since September [there were] nine staff deaths. The child and student deaths are more difficult to find.

"The DfE [Department for Education] say they don't have information about teacher deaths, only teacher absences. They are keeping teacher absence figures secret!

"When a member of the public asked [the ONS], 'How many education staff have died of coronavirus?', they answered using figures from March to May 2020. They have figures more recent, as they have them for other occupations and the whole country. There is a major cover-up going on.

"You have to ask yourself, if the risk to teachers, TAs and support staff was no more than the risk to anyone else of dying from this virus, then why would they not be open with that information?

"Some research found there were 75 confirmed education staff COVID deaths in the six weeks from March 20 to April 20. During that time there were 238 in-service teacher deaths. In 2018, there were 130 in-service deaths. This is ringing alarm bells."

Frontline nurse Rory described the terrible impact of the pandemic on the National Health Service (NHS).

"There are 31,624 patients with the virus in hospitals. In London, Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan had to declare a major incident. There are 35 percent more people in hospital with the virus than at the peak of the pandemic in April.

"Ambulance services were getting more than 8,000 calls a day. Normally in the peak of a busy winter day they have around 5,500. Firefighters and the police have been called to drive ambulances.

"Intensive care professionals are at breaking point. Nurses are compelled to look after not one critically patient but two or three. Hundreds of staff have been infected with the virus due to inadequate personal protective equipment. More than 650 health and social care workers have died.

"Even before the pandemic hit, decades-long underfunding, slashing of services, reducing bed capacity including ICU beds, not addressing the staff crisis and the privatisation of services had crippled the NHS.

"Both the Tories and Labour Party are responsible. None of the health unions raised a finger to fight this."

After schools reopened, so did universities and colleges. Student Danny Knightley, an IYSSE member, told the meeting "universities across the country informed students they would

not be returning to campuses next week, and would be forced to spend yet another term at home, with no access to resources, libraries or their teachers, and undergo the third term in a row of online learning.

"While this is the best course of action under the present dangerous circumstances, we are only in this situation due to the chronic mismanagement of the pandemic by the government.

"University students are still expected to pay the exorbitant university fees of over £9,000 a year, and some international students are forced to pay £36,000, purely for online learning. This has led to a spree of rent strikes across the country.

"This last year has shown that university institutions and student unions are not willing to fight for the rights and the safety of their members. It is the task of students and educators to form their own independent action committees. These committees must stand in solidarity with workers in all industries across the UK and internationally."

One of the attendees asked, "Why are there more key workers' children in school than in the first lockdown?"

Kent emphasised this is because parents are forced to work and therefore have to send their children to school: "The problem is the government and unions, who don't want schools to close, not parents."

"The definition of key worker is broad," she explained. During the first lockdown "schools could limit attendance by saying both parents must be key workers ... Now it's one. Also, if you cannot work from home, you can go to work.

"There are stories in the media blaming parents for sending kids to school when they didn't need to. We are not blaming parents. They are under tremendous strain financially. They send their kids in even if they don't want to, because of government and union policy. That's where our hostility and anger must be directed."

All those looking for a way forward should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, attend its meetings and sign up to receive our regular newsletter here.



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