UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee members discuss: Are schools safe?

Helen Clarke, Tania Kent
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Helen Clarke is a member of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and a primary school teacher. She has been researching deaths of educators from COVID-19 in the face of official concealment and obstruction. She submitted the article published below to the Committee, which is responded to by its secretary Tania Kent.

Pressure has been mounting on the UK government and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to release data on COVID-19 cases and deaths of school staff. No wonder Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty snapped at a BBC interviewer two weeks ago, when he was asked why teachers weren't being prioritised for vaccinations. Whitty claimed teachers were "not at a greater risk of acquiring COVID than other professions", although data had recently been released showing teacher infection rates in some places were more than four times the average.

Several people have put in requests for the information to the Department for Education (DfE) and the ONS under the Freedom of Information Act. They wanted to know not just how many people had died of COVID-19 but how it had affected different groups of frontline workers including school staff. The ONS has been using a legal clause saying it does not have to release information if it intends to release it at some point in the future. Some people whose requests were not very specific simply found themselves directed back to the data for deaths between March and May 2020. This continued until last week, when the ONS announced that it intended to release the data for deaths to the end of 2020, on January 25. This data has been suppressed for months. Why?

It seems they were not just sitting on the data after all. They were busy trying to find a way to put a misleading spin on it to reinforce the government line that schools, teachers and students are safe.

The report says that "there were 139 deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19) in teaching and educational professionals aged 20 to 64 years registered between 9 March and 28 December 2020 in England and Wales."

In this way, they have carefully doctored the figures to remove the deaths of teaching assistants, catering staff, midday supervisors, site supervisors, caretakers and cleaners. Their deaths do feature in these figures but elsewhere, under the figures for caring, leisure and other service occupations--which had the second highest rates of Covid deaths for both women and men.

Like reports that have preceded it, the ONS report states that Covid deaths in "teaching and educational professionals, such as secondary school teachers, were not statistically significantly raised when compared with the rates seen in the population among those of the same age and sex." In this way the government tacitly admits that not only are teacher death rates higher than for other occupations, but also that it has taken them quite some time and effort to manipulate the figures to remove a lot of the deaths to hide how bad it really is.

This shocking death toll of 139 then is just the number of teachers under 64 years of age killed by the virus between March and December last year in England and Wales. It does not include Alan Fitchett, a 65-year-old secondary school teacher from Hertfordshire who died of the virus last March. It does not include Ian Wilson, a school janitor, Gerry McHugh, a maths teacher, or David McIlroy, a secondary school teacher, because they lived in Scotland. It does not include Sandra Martin, Michele Cockrill, Cath Strangwood, or Lynne Morgan, because they were teaching assistants. It may not even include Wendy Jacobs or Nick Hague because they were primary headteachers and not classroom teachers.

These are just a few of the names I have been able to find of the people who have lost their lives in this pandemic, going to work each day in workplaces which should have been safe but were not.

Tory Fibs on Twitter has gone through the figures and calculated that the real totals—including those over 64 years of age and those who work in education but are not teachers—is 570.

In terms of child and student deaths, it is even more difficult to find information. The BBC reports there have been 1,788 hospital admissions of school age children since March and that 27 children have died of COVID-19 since June. The enormous daily death tolls often report the age of the youngest and oldest victims to lose their lives: twice this month the youngest victim in the UK has been just 8 years old. Just before Christmas, in different parts of London, two 15-year-old students tragically died of the virus, a boy and a girl.

Last May, the Department for Education's own scientific advisor told Parliament that a wider reopening of schools could bring together "hundreds of potential vectors" that could lead to the spread of the virus and there was a "low degree of confidence" in studies suggesting children transmit COVID-19 any less than adults. He was immediately made to write a "letter of clarification." Having silenced their own scientific advisor, the propaganda continued relentlessly throughout the spring and summer regarding the damage to children from not being in school and the minimisation of the threat of the virus—despite the lack of any meaningful safety measures in schools.

We were told, probably more accurately, that children were highly unlikely to be badly affected or to die from this virus. What the scientists omitted to point out to us was that a tiny percentage of a huge number of cases would result in a significant number of children and teenagers killed by the virus. A larger percentage of a huge number of cases would result in a large and ever-growing number of education staff killed by the virus.

Over the Christmas break alone, the families and friends of Nick Hague, Paul Hilditch, Stuart Hall, Sonia Ellington, Jan Docker and Lynne Morgan lost their loved ones.

This terrible death toll was added to this month as Donna Coleman, 42, a teacher at Burnley College, Lancashire, with no known underlying

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health conditions died from COVID-19 on January 6. On January 20, newly qualified teacher, Claudia Marsh, collapsed and died of the virus in hospital on her 25th birthday.

On January 13, Dr Mary Ramsey of Public Health England confirmed that the UK is following a herd immunity policy of deliberately allowing the virus to spread when she told Parliament we need to "allow the disease to circulate in younger people."

School staff and students are paying for this experiment with their lives.

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Helen's report raises many important issues and facts which are not seeing the light of day in the official media, which is complicit in blocking the truth in the service of a reactionary political agenda pursued by the Conservative government, supported by the Labour Party and imposed in the workplace by the trade unions.

This agenda is the insistence that schools remain open, whatever the costs, in pursuit of profits for the rich, many of whom have quite literally made a killing out of the pandemic through massive government bailouts and handouts while globally millions have lost their lives and livelihoods.

Helen correctly identifies that there has been a concerted effort and propaganda campaign to conceal a fact which is essential to the wellbeing of teachers, educators and children alike: that schools are not safe and a key vector for the transmission of the virus.

I would add some additional facts, as well as reiterating the programme and perspective of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee which must now urgently be adopted to prevent further deaths.

Helen notes that the ONS data has been doctored, so that incredibly the data of deaths from March to December is less than the data that was released on teacher deaths from March to June! The ONS "top-line" data said 139 staff aged 64 or under have died. The figure was 148 from March to June. This figure allowed the media to claim that education settings carry no higher risk than elsewhere and the plans to reopen the schools in the next few weeks can proceed, despite tens of thousands still being infected, an average of 1,200 daily deaths and the spectre of yet another new variant from South Africa.

Helen notes statistics compiled by the Tory Fibs Twitter page of 570 deaths, which the Skwawkbox website breaks down into the following categories:

Higher education teaching professionals (39 deaths), Further education teaching professionals (48), secondary education teaching professionals (148), primary and nursery education teaching professionals (85), special needs education teaching professionals (14), Senior professionals of educational establishments (40), education advisers and school inspectors (9), teaching and other educational professionals n.e.c. (35), nursery nurses and assistants (20), childminders and related occupations (36), playworkers (4), teaching assistants (74), educational support assistants (18). It notes that without even counting the over-64s, 217 have died.

The ONS data has shown that school-age children as a group had the fastest rate of growth in Covid cases throughout the autumn term. This was a direct result of government negligence on school safety. It was known within three weeks of reopening the schools and universities in September that over 50 percent of new cases were being recorded among school aged children and students. By early December, it was also known that there had been a 75-fold increase in the infection rates of children aged 2-17 and that the majority of those infected with the new UK variant were in this age group.

A study that analysed the impact of the second national lockdown found that there was no impact on cases in schools. The REACT-1 round 7 interim report authored by Imperial College London found that school aged children were the only group to see an increase. It carried out population-based surveillance of the SARS-CoV-2 and found "an increase in weighted prevalence in participants aged 5 to 12 years and those aged 13 to 17 years, i.e., among school-aged children, but a decline in all adult age groups."

Most of this increase was a result of the "new variant" of the virus which is far more transmissible and 30 percent more deadly, which the government had also known about since September. When schools responded to the huge increase in infections within their communities, such as in Greenwich and Lewisham, by calling for the closure of schools just two days early, they were threatened with legal action. Despite the repeated claims by the government that they were not aware of the new variant at that time, it was exposed last week that Health Secretary Matt Hancock lied to the select committee regarding knowledge of the variant when the government threatened legal action.

Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE's permanent secretary, giving evidence to the Select Committee on January 14 acknowledged that her department "became aware of the existence of the new variant of Covid-19 when the health secretary made his oral statement to the House of Commons", which meant the government knew about the strain when it issued the powers under the Coronavirus Act to block the closure of schools in local authorities.

How is it that the government has been able to impose its programme of herd immunity, with its devastating consequences when there is broad based opposition amongst educators and the broader community?

It is thanks to the role of the trade unions who have blocked the opposition, repeated the government propaganda that schools must stay open to protect "disadvantaged children" and the protection of their mental health, without ever identifying who is responsible for this situation.

Crucially it was the trade unions that allowed schools to reopen in September without even one of their safety demands being met. They are culpable in the deaths of educators and will continue to be so. They have not challenged the data and instead published their "Education Recovery Plan" for the reopening of schools!

The protection of teachers and the working class can only take place through an independent struggle, mobilising the immense social power and strength of the working class in a political general strike. We must continue to build the influence of the Educator's Rank-and-File Safety Committee among the broadest section of educators, nationally and internationally linking with workers across many sectors. The ONS data does reveal one truth and that is that it is the working class and its poorest sections who have been sacrificed in their tens of thousands for the protection of profits. This must end now!

Thank you Helen for your submission and your continued support for the work of the committee.

Regards,

Tania Kent

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