

UK National Education Union bolsters homicidal plans to reopen schools and the economy

Margot Miller
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On January 28, the National Education Union (NEU) released its Education Recovery Plan January 2021, urging the UK government “to create the conditions to sustain education throughout and beyond the pandemic.”

In lockstep with the government, the plan is predicated on the dangerous fiction that it is possible to reopen schools safely while the pandemic is raging.

The previous day, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had announced that he would set out a “roadmap” for lifting lockdown restrictions on February 22 and that schools would reopen from March 8. The government’s official COVID-19 death toll, a significant undercount, had just passed the grim milestone of 100,000. Its own statistics agencies had reported that the prevalence of the virus is still extremely high and, at best, falling very slowly. Over the next few days, dozens of cases of new, more dangerous variants of the virus were recorded across the country.

Opening schools, which Johnson has acknowledged are “vectors for transmission”, in these circumstances would lead to an explosion of infections, hospitalisation and deaths.

Both the Labour opposition and the trade unions support the government’s homicidal agenda, with a few caveats required to sell the government’s “roadmap” to educators and the general public. Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the NEU, said in response to Johnson’s announcement, “We all want schools to open, but like the Prime Minister we want them to open when it is safe to do so... We agree with Boris Johnson that this is a balancing act.”

The NEU, the largest education union with a membership of 450,000, has fallen behind government policy since the virus first hit, acting alongside the other unions to divert and suppress opposition to the Johnson’s herd immunity policy. Its latest Education Recovery Plan “sets out how to reopen schools and colleges in a safe and sustainable way... away from the Government’s stop/start approach, which has resulted in schools and colleges being closed to full pupil intakes twice.”

The plan states that on June 10 the “NEU wrote to [prime minister] Boris Johnson with its first education recovery plan. We did not receive a reply.”

What they do not mention is that the union went along with the government’s reopening of schools and campuses in the autumn term—knowing full well that even the limited measures they were calling for were not in place and that their members, pupils and families would be in grave danger. The results proved catastrophic.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), approximately one in 1,400 people in England had COVID-19 in the week August 30-September 5. By January 23, the ONS reported that the rate had skyrocketed to one in 55, and one in 35 in London. On average, 1,000 died each day in January, the deadliest month in the pandemic. Notwithstanding government claims that schools are safe, official statistics reveal widespread coronavirus infection in schools and the deaths of 570 education workers.

The latest NEU plan states that the union “will campaign for Government to accept this plan so that our members can return to school—*only when the science says it is safe to do so* [their emphasis].” This reassurance is worthless.

When school gates opened last September, the NEU quietly shelved the science, dropping its own five safety criteria as a condition for safe re-openings. The criteria included the *R* rate being below 1, test, track and trace being in operation, social distancing in place and the protection of vulnerable staff. None were fulfilled or, like social distancing, even possible in a school setting. The NEU fell behind the government so that furloughed parents could return to work and resume profit making for big business.

In November, Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools (BRTUS, now Parents United) called for a parents’ strike against the government’s refusal to close schools as infections raced out of control. The NEU ignored a letter of appeal from BRTUS to call its members out, and like the other education unions sabotaged the strike. United action by parents and educators

would have shut schools and significantly slowed down the spread of the virus, saving thousands of lives.

The NEU's Recovery Plan includes social distancing, limiting the numbers on site through rotas and remote education, increased use of face coverings and better ventilation, specific support for SEND (special needs) settings, and the vaccination of education staff. The criterion of testing and contact tracing has been jibed, after the government dropped its £78 million plan to roll out testing in schools, because the lateral flow tests proved impractical and the results unreliable.

Vaccination is presented as the panacea to enable a return to normality. But vaccines must be coupled with strong public health measures to suppress the virus until the whole population is protected. By March 8, millions of vulnerable people will still be unvaccinated. The further rollout of the vaccine is threatened by the fierce vaccine wars emerging between nations. New strains of the virus which make inoculation less effective are already being allowed to spread widely.

The NEU's plan appeals to the government to look to the future and build a better education system, with more resources like laptops, staff, ending punitive welfare reforms that have plunged many families into destitution, and an end to child poverty.

This is a cruel joke, after more than a decade of austerity cuts have been imposed by governments and Labour councils—with the collaboration of the unions. This resulted in a dramatic increase in poverty, accelerated by the pandemic crisis, so that the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts UK child poverty will rise to 5.2 million in 2022.

The NEU's appeals for a fully resourced education system are for the record. They are under no illusions that the government will reverse its attacks on the working class.

To cover for the government and its own complicity over cuts to education and the unsafe reopening schools, a much-hyped “major announcement” in a Zoom meeting hosted by the NEU on January 26 turned out to be the launch of a joint fundraising campaign with the *Daily Mirror*, Help a Child to Learn.

Senior Vice President of the NEU Daniele Kebebe complained the government had not made good on its promise to roll out laptops to schools, that the attainment gap between richer and underprivileged children had widened. The *Mirror* and NEU were therefore making a national appeal to the public to help plug the education funding gap, and the NEU would start the ball rolling with a pledge of £1 million, paid for out of members' subscriptions.

The *Mirror*'s headline that morning had been, “We just want to go back to school”.

Teachers' responses on social media to this stunt ranged

from lukewarm to scathing. Mrs B posted on Twitter: “You are my union representing teachers not a children's charity. I really feel it's the govt's job to fund schools and by dipping further into our pockets we are letting the govt off the hook.”

In the Zoom meeting, which did not take questions, Jeddeo asked drily in the chat, “Wouldn't it be more efficient for us to cancel union subs and set up a standing order direct to schools?”

Amanda wrote, “Thought this was going to be a ‘major announcement’ to finally help those of us who are currently teaching in lockdown in schools where all staff are expected in, up to 20 children are being housed in one small room, no segregation, and no safety in the school, teaching online as well as in person etc etc. O well. Better luck next time.”

The NEU and other unions stand on the side of government and the financial oligarchy, which will tolerate no interruption to the accumulation of profit. To this end they are prepared to sacrifice the lives of educators and pupils by agreeing their return to the classroom before the virus has been suppressed and controlled.

Workers have shown time and again their opposition to these policies and a willingness to fight. An online meeting of the NEU ahead of the planned reopening of schools at the start of January was attended by a world-record 400,000 people. Many of these school workers then voted with their feet, refusing to return to schools and forcing Johnson to declare the current lockdown. Tens of thousands of teachers in Chicago are currently refusing to return to unsafe in-person teaching.

Educators rank-and-file safety committees have been set up in the UK, US and Europe and Australia to provide this opposition with a political programme and international organisation, independent of the trade unions. They are fighting for a political general strike and a response to the pandemic that puts lives before profits. We call on education workers in the UK to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today and attend its upcoming meetings.



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