

Johnson government's homicidal drive to reopen UK schools justified by feigned concern for children's welfare

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The Johnson government is hell-bent on relaxing lockdown restrictions to reopen the UK economy, beginning February 22. Schools are to reopen in England from March 8 with the Tories justifying this on the grounds of feigned concerns about children's welfare.

Schools in Scotland and Wales will reopen even earlier, on February 22, and Johnson is under pressure to reopen sooner in England. Tory MP Mark Harper, from a 70-strong section of the party in the anti-lockdown "Covid Recovery Group", told the BBC: "I was pleased the Prime Minister confirmed that schools will be the first thing to reopen from 8th March but disappointed it wasn't earlier. Now we see that Scotland is going to start bringing back pupils from 22 February, straight after half-term, many colleagues will hope that Ministers will look urgently to see if that could happen in England as well."

Professor Robert Dingwall of the government's New and Emerging Respiratory Advisory Group (NERVTAG), referring to the numbers vaccinated, told the *Telegraph*, "Many people... think it's a tolerable risk to get the kids back as the Scots are doing."

The pandemic demands the strictest lockdown measures. At least 113,000 people have succumbed to the virus in the UK and new more transmissible variants are emerging.

Just over 12 million people of the 66 million population have received only their first vaccine dose. Until the virus is suppressed in the population, the opportunity lurks for vaccine-resistant strains to develop. According to one study, whose results are being verified, the protection offered by the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine may not be as effective against the new South African variant.

When Johnson precipitously reopened schools and businesses last September, it led to a massive resurgence of the virus which killed more people than the first wave in the spring. He used the same cynical justification for opening schools then: "It's the kids from the poorer families who aren't going back, and so you are entrenching social injustice."

Another unsafe reopening would be devastating. Professor Neil Ferguson's team at Imperial College London warns that easing restrictions too rapidly from March to July could lead to

an additional 130,800 fatalities between now and June next year. This would take UK COVID-19 deaths up to around a quarter of a million.

Addressing Parliament January 27, Johnson declared reopening schools "a national priority" and insisted, "we are doing everything in our power to keep them open because children's education is too vital... This is why schools were the very last to close and when we move out of lockdown, they will be the first to reopen."

Children's education and mental health certainly suffered the over the past year. The attainment gap between poorer and better-off children widened. Referrals to child mental health services reached an all-time high. Charities such as Childline and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children experienced an increase in children under 11 seeking counselling.

Child and adolescent psychotherapist Jane O'Rourke, founder of website for mental health professionals *Mind in Mind*, told the BBC *Today* programme for "deprived children, the pandemic has exacerbated issues... not just [for] teenagers. I am seeing very young children displaying signs of depression, five, six, seven-year-olds."

But the government—backed by the Labour opposition and education unions—is not rushing to reopen schools out of concern for children's welfare. As in the US and Europe, schools are viewed only as holding pens for children which must be opened to get parents back to work and producing profits for the corporations. Child welfare is being weaponized in a despicable propaganda campaign to justify criminality and mass deaths described by the British Medical Journal as "social murder".

Johnson had the gall to repeat his previous absurdity that schools are simultaneously "safe" and contribute to the spread of the pandemic: "I want to stress that the problem is not that schools are unsafe to children. The problem is that schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households."

The fact is that schools, alongside workplaces, are proven major vectors for the virus and that closing schools is one of the

most effective measures that can be taken to save lives. Up to 100 children a week are currently being hospitalised with paediatric inflammatory multi-system syndrome (PIMS), a rare inflammatory disease linked with coronavirus.

Johnson was not contradicted by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who agreed, “Of course we welcome any steps to reopen schools.” He then wrote in the pro-Tory *Daily Mail*, “I share the Government’s ambition to make it a national mission to reopen our schools. I will do everything in my power as leader of the Labour Party to make that happen.”

The education unions took the same line. National Education Union (NEU) joint leader Mary Bousted said in a press release on January 27, “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* [emphasis added].”

The Tories’, Labour’s and the unions’ concern for the fate of children is belied by decades of cuts to children’s services and rising child poverty. Johnson added a derisory £300 million to the £1 billion catch-up programme for pupils announced in November. This measly amount is no compensation for the privations of the last year for which the government was responsible—overseeing a surge in unemployment, poverty and destitution—let alone the decades of cuts to education and children’s services.

Between 2009-10 and 2019-20, spending on state education fell by 8 percent in real terms. In this time, more than 1,000 Sure Start centres—that provided a wide variety of services to support children’s learning skills, health and well-being—closed due to Tory austerity cuts imposed by Labour controlled councils. These forced the poorest families to rely on volunteer provision run by charities and the church.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation wrote in a recent report that “in 2019, 4.2 million children were living in poverty” and a total of “14.5 million people in the UK, over one in five.”

United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, following his visit to the UK in 2018 reported that, “Although the United Kingdom is the world’s fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. *Close to 40 percent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021.* [emphasis added]”

Such deprivation has had a catastrophic effect on the mental health and well-being of the UK’s children. Over the past five years mental health professionals repeatedly emphasised the impact on children’s mental health of social disadvantage combined with government-driven tests and exam pressures.

In 2017, research carried out by the National Health Service (NHS) reported one in 20 five to 19-year-olds met the criteria for having two or more mental disorders. One in eight (12.8 percent) five to 19-year-olds had at least one mental health

disorder. That rose in the first year of the pandemic to one in six, which translates into four to five children in each class.

Less than one in three children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition get access to NHS care and treatment and the average median waiting time for children in 2017/18 was five weeks to receive an initial assessment and nine weeks to receive treatment. In 2019/20, 538,564 children were referred for help, an increase of 35 percent on 2018/19, and nearly 60 percent on 2017/18. The numbers getting treatment are also increasing but at a much slower rate. In 2019/20, 391,940 children received treatment.

Research by the Young Minds (YM) mental health charity on A&E attendances by young people with psychiatric conditions in 2018 showed a doubling in five years to 27,487.

The fight to put an end to child poverty, provide high-quality children’s services and education, and to end the mass loss of life from the pandemic puts the working class in direct conflict with the profit interests of capitalism. These goals are incompatible with the monopolisation of huge swathes of social wealth by a tiny super-rich oligarchy, many of whom have profited handsomely throughout the pandemic and benefited from government bailouts and money printing. That wealth must be seized and distributed to meet social need.

Chicago educators in the US fighting to prevent the reopening of schools and save lives understand that to fight for their own interests the working class must rely on its own strength. Educators rank-and-file safety committees have been set up in the UK, US, Europe and Australia to provide this struggle with a political programme and international organisation, independent of the trade unions. We urge all educators, parents and students to sign up to read the Committee’s newsletter and join its work today.



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