

Attend online meeting on Saturday to organise fightback!

Prime Minister Johnson backed by Scottish and Welsh governments in deadly school reopenings

Thomas Scripps
18 February 2021

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes the unsafe reopening of schools in Britain, which are starting next week. School pupils are to return to the classroom from Monday in Scotland and Wales, beginning the UK's premature lifting of the national lockdown in the interests of the corporations.

Following a COVID-19 press briefing Monday in which she said she was “very, very, very keen to go ahead” with plans for children to return to on-site learning, Scottish National Party (SNP) First Minister Nicola Sturgeon insisted “In terms of the order in which we exit lockdown, the Scottish Government has always made clear that education should be the priority.” She announced that primary school children up to age seven and some secondary school students in exam years will return to school on February 22. Another phase of school reopenings will take place during the first week of March.

Wales will begin a phased reopening of schools, initially for children up to age seven and some older children on vocational courses, from February 22.

The SNP and the Welsh Labour Party-controlled devolved government are working in unison with Downing Street. At his Monday press conference, Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledged to outline a “roadmap” next week, “saying as much as we possibly can about the route to normality... Because we want this lockdown to be the last. And we want progress to be cautious but also irreversible.”

Johnson has set a target of March 8 for reopening schools in England.

This criminal policy will lead to a disastrous increase in transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Numerous studies have detailed the major role played by on-site schooling in community transmission.

By December 12 last year, after schools in England had been open for three months, secondary and primary school-

aged pupils had the highest infection rates in the country of any age group, according to Office for National Statistics (ONS) data. Government statistics released January revealed the widespread infection of school staff, who the National Education Union calculated were a minimum of 1.9 and up to seven times more likely to be exposed to the virus than the general population.

Imperial College London's REACT study, covering the period February 4 to February 13, found that the age groups with the highest rates of infection were 18 to 24-year-olds and 5 to 12-year-olds. The second group covers children of primary school age.

Due to the limited nature of the lockdown, many parents have been forced to work unnecessarily and to send their children to school. Department for Education figures released this week revealed that attendance rates in primary schools were now six times higher than during the first lockdown last spring, when approximately 4 percent of pupils attended class. Last week, 24 percent of primary school pupils were on-site—an increase on the 23 percent the week before and the third week in a row that primary school attendance has increased.

Overall, 16 percent of all state school pupils were in classes on February 11. Of these approximately 894,000 children of key workers were in attendance last week.

The prevalence of the virus remains high and an increase in infection rates will lead to a rapid explosion of cases. When schools were reopened last September, contributing to the devastating second wave of the virus, the ONS estimated one in 1,400 people in England had coronavirus the previous week. According to the REACT study, the rate is now seven times higher, one in 200.

The danger is heightened by the spread of new variants of the virus. The (B.1.1.7) variant, first detected in Kent last September, and which now accounts for the majority of UK

cases, is believed to be 30 to 70 percent more transmissible. Last Friday, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) reported it was also between 30 and 70 percent more deadly.

Genetic screening tests have found 217 cases of the “South African variant” (B.1.351) in Britain, which is thought to be up to 50 percent more contagious. It has a mutation which makes it more resistant to the body’s immune defences, limiting the effectiveness of current vaccines. Some cases of the Kent strain found in the south west of the UK have this mutation.

This week, the UK discovered 38 cases, and four more “probable cases”, of yet another strain—B.1.525, currently most prevalent in Nigeria. The BBC explained, “One of these changes B.1.525 has is a mutation called E484K—also found in the Brazil and South African variants—that may help the virus evade some of the body’s immune system defences.

“Other alterations make it similar to the UK ‘Kent’ variant that experts say is more contagious than the original version of coronavirus that started the pandemic.”

Scientists worldwide are warning that these new variants will spur new waves of infection. Caroline Colijn, a COVID modeler and mathematician at Simon Fraser University in Canada, likened the situation to a “forest fire”, saying, “We’re seeing things drop because of restrictions—those fire hoses we put in front of the fire. Then we turn the hoses off and we’re surprised that this wave is coming back.”

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s coverage of this global crisis.

Professor Saloshni Naidoo, Head of the Department of Public Health Medicine at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa warned, “If there are more variants, and if they are more transmissible... then the third wave can be more severe than previous waves.”

Professor Steven Riley, a member of the UK’s Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, told the *Evening Standard*, “If for some reason we were to choose to just pretend it (coronavirus) wasn’t here any more then there is the potential to go back to a wave that is a similar size to the one that we are in now.”

The spread of the more contagious strains is seeing more children infected and hospitalised. The *British Medical Journal* reported February 9, “[M]ore young children are being infected in Israel and Italy, emerging data suggest”. Israeli medical officials have told hospitals to prepare for more child coronavirus patients as schools reopen.

This reality is being buried under an avalanche of government and corporate media propaganda, recycling the claims of cherry-picked studies and scientists. But in the face of mounting evidence globally that education settings are major vectors in spreading COVID-19, the propaganda offensive aimed at the unsafe reopening of schools can only proceed thanks to the open collusion of Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party and the trade unions.

National Education Union (NEU) Joint General Secretary Mary Bousted tweeted yesterday that the Imperial REACT survey made “the strongest case for a phased re-opening of schools to full pupil intakes... Everyone wants them to be opened in a safe and sustainable way so let’s make that happen.” The NEU has consistently sacrificed its members’ safety throughout the pandemic.

According to the *Telegraph*, union bosses are due to meet with the government today “for talks to finalise plans for mass testing secondary pupils on their return.”

Workers will be watching these events with a painful sense of déjà vu. Last year saw the same promises and demands for “proof” of school safety followed by the abandonment of the unions’ supposed “red lines”. According to the *Times Educational Supplement* at least 570 educators have so far paid with their lives. If the reopening is also allowed to proceed as it did in September, it can only produce the same terrible consequences and worse.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all workers, parents and students who recognise the grave danger posed by school reopenings to attend our online meeting on Saturday February 20 at 2pm to discuss how to organise the fightback, independently of the trade unions, against the governments homicidal agenda.



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