

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes unsafe school reopenings

Our reporter
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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held a lively online meeting on Saturday, just days before yesterday's unsafe reopening of schools across Scotland and Wales, and as the Johnson government moves to reopen all school on March 8.

The meeting was attended by educators, parents, and students. Chair of the Committee Tania Kent, a special needs teacher said, "The purpose of this meeting is to make an appeal to those in attendance to take the necessary steps to build independent forms of organisation within your workplace, school, college and university to oppose the deadly agenda of the ruling class which is to allow the pandemic to let rip through communities in the weeks and months ahead. Every single country in the world is in the process of reopening schools and the economy under conditions in which the virus remains, virulent, out of control and mutating."

Kent explained, "Yesterday, a joint statement was issued by nine trade unions who work within education. These are the largest trade unions within the UK with several million members, including the National Education Union [NEU], NASWUT, NAHT and GMB, UNISON and UNITE. This statement was sent to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to influence his announcement of the reopening of schools due on Monday. The letter confirms that the unions are nothing but an arm of the corporations and speak in their interests. They are fully complicit in the herd immunity agenda of the government. Short of a rebellion against these organisations and the building of independent action committees, the working class will continue to be treated as lambs to slaughter.

"The letter does not make a single reference to the over 120,000 who have lost their lives to this pandemic or demand a single safety precaution to protect its members. Its sole concern is to block any further disruption to the economy."

After a pro-forma warning to Prime Minister Boris

Johnson against an immediate full return to schools, the statement merely calls "for a few weeks rollout... It continues: 'We are committed to bringing all children and young people back into the classroom as soon as possible. However, it is counterproductive if there is a danger of causing another surge in the virus, and the potential for a further period of lockdown'... [the unions] are concerned not with the loss of life and suffering of their members, but the losses in profit that could impact the ruling class."

Kent concluded with an urgent appeal, "We are calling 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 build its influence and link it to other key sectors of workers who confront the same issues. We will provide assistance in setting up these in your school and workplace."

US Socialist Equality Party member Evan Blake spoke on the lessons of the recent teachers' struggle in Chicago and the broader significance of the campaign to reopen schools in the US. "I think above all, this has been really a critical lesson for educators and the entire working class on the nature of the Democratic Party, the pseudo-left and the trade unions."

Democrat President Joe Biden had directly intervened on a number of occasions to gear up the reopening of schools. "I think this whole process has been very eye-opening for educators everywhere, most of whom voted for Biden and have long had illusions in reformism and the Democratic Party. Many still have these illusions, but the basic reality that the Democrats fundamentally serve the same capitalist class is becoming clearer to broad sections of educators and other workers every day."

"Schools began reopening in Chicago on January 4. The Chicago Teachers Union did nothing to oppose this and allowed over 150 teachers to be locked-out of their online classrooms when they refused to return for in-person

learning.

“Under enormous pressure from rank-and-file teachers, the CTU was forced to call a strike authorization vote before other grades were scheduled to return in mid-January, which passed with overwhelming support. They then continued secret negotiations for weeks with Democrat Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the school district.

“In the aftermath of the CTU’s abject betrayal, the Chicago rank-and-file committee and the Socialist Equality Party have been established as the centre of opposition in Chicago. We’re continuing to organize among educators, and to prepare them for the struggles that will erupt as the catastrophe of school reopenings unfolds over the coming weeks.

“Each of these struggles will have the potential to rapidly spread to other industries, and we’re fighting to popularize the call for a political general strike to close all schools and nonessential workplaces, with full compensation for workers, in unity with your committees in the UK, Germany and around the world fighting for the same program.”

International Youth and Students for Social Equality member (IYSSE) Gregor Link, speaking from Germany, said that “COVID-19 currently claims 400 lives every day on average in Germany alone with 4,000 people dying each day across Europe”. In Germany, “total new cases have risen from 6 percent to more than 22 percent within just two weeks.”

Primary school teacher Helen said, “There are no real safety measures in schools, still no masks being worn in classrooms and I think the schools around where I am are probably around 15 to 20 percent capacity and there are cases almost every day... Obviously, if that goes up to full opening that can only get worse. We need to do what we can to stop this from happening because it’s clearly not safe.”

Students Sasha (Cardiff University) and Danny (Oxford) spoke about the dire impact of the pandemic on the life of students, and the growing anger of the student population that has expressed itself in a series of rent strikes at over 50 universities.

Miles Driver, from the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, reviewed the experiences of transport workers in the capital, who have fought against managements and the trade unions, who have collaborated to force transport workers to work in unsafe conditions. He reported the deaths of nearly 50 bus drivers. “Only on the basis of rank-and-file committees where workers themselves can organise themselves can we go forward

nationally and internationally. The pandemic is a global crisis and requires a global solution.”

Mike, a retired secondary school teacher from Wales, sent in a supportive comment reading, “The trade unions are conspiring with the establishment to get everyone back to work, back to normal. Who wants to go back to normal? We need to move forward to something better for people of the world. Don’t let the ruling class divide us from each other.”

While still a Labour member, Mike said, “History has shown us that we can’t rely on the Labour Party or the trade union movement when the going gets tough. Politicians and the trade unions tell us to think of the national interest when what they mean is the interest of the ruling class.”

Lucia asked “Why do you think parents are not being given a choice of in-person over remote learning. Do you think we could organise a parent-strike?”

Kent related the experience of the parents’ strike that was sabotaged by the teaching unions and Labour Party in November last year, and the response of the Committee to the organisations that had facilitated this betrayal.

Linda, a parent of three school children, spoke of her concern on the numbers of people that are refusing a vaccine. Liz Smith explained that “vaccine hesitancy” among some oppressed sections of workers was in part an expression of mistrust towards those in power, whose policies had led to the deaths of so many of their loved ones. She called attention to a WSWS article addressing some of these issues: Why do US health care workers continue to refuse vaccination against COVID-19?

Kent concluded with an appeal for educators, parents and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee which “will be meeting again before the reopening of schools in England in two weeks’ time, so we need to really build this campaign and build its influence more broadly.”



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