UK teachers denounce National Education Union's refusal to oppose schools reopening

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2 March 2021

The National Education Union's March 1 online meeting was dominated by broad hostility and anger among teachers and other educators to the NEU colluding with the criminal reopening of schools.

The event was organised to "talk through our new advice on wider reopening" of schools, beginning March 8. A measure of the discrediting of the NEU was the 17,000 attendance, compared with the last Zoom meeting held on January 3, dubbed "the largest ever online trade union meeting", with 400,000 participating.

The perspective advanced by the NEU offered no alternative to that of Boris Johnson's Conservative government. It places the NEU in the same trench as Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party and rest of the trade union bureaucracy in backing the reopening of schools and the economy at the expense of health and lives of educators, students and parents.

All the education unions have pleaded with the government for a phased return over a few weeks as opposed to a "big bang" full reopening of schools. Johnson ignored their advice and announced on February 22 that all schools and colleges will open fully from March 8, with just one week's phased return for secondary schools to implement lateral flow testing of pupils.

The response by the teaching unions to Johnson's announcement that this will the "last lockdown," despite resulting in "more infections, more hospitalisations and… more deaths" is to enforce it!

Before the meeting began, many on the chat were demanding that the union "protect lives"; "we don't want a chat we want measures and actions"; "what are you going to do?", "explain what is so different now than January?" The overwhelming majority of several hundred comments were hostile to the union's response, challenged the lies it peddled, and linked to articles contradicting its arguments. Many announced they were leaving the meeting and some the union in disgust.

NEU President Robin Bevan began by claiming that throughout the pandemic, "The NEU has pitched its advice based on science and evidence absolutely correctly. We were right at every point of the lockdown." This claim received the response, "Great. You were right, but what I care about is protecting us and you haven't done this."

Not one retreat the government was forced to implement was in response to a challenge by the unions, but rather the broad opposition from teachers and parents. The closure of schools in March 2020 followed a mass petitions of over half a million parents and 250,000 teachers demanding closure, while the unions did nothing.

Last June, when the government announced they would reopen schools, the unions only called for a two-week delay so schools could get ready. But millions of parents refused to send their children to school, forcing another retreat.

The reopening of schools last September was carried out with the complicity of the education unions, which ditched all their "safety measures." Schools became the key vector of the virus with children aged 2-17 the group with the highest level of infections. This allowed the virus to spiral throughout the community with more deaths caused in the period September to December than throughout the beginning of the pandemic.

It was only when it was clear that the opposition that was growing amongst educators and parents to the horrifying COVID-19 death rates—which have taken the lives of at least 570 education workers—that the NEU asked its members to refuse to return to work in January by citing Section 44 of the workplace Health

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and Safety Act. The NEU and other education unions refused to organise strike action or walkouts called for at some schools. When the government tried to reopen primary schools on January 4, teachers stayed away forcing the Tories, who were also concerned that the action of educators could be the spearhead of a broader movement of opposition, to announce the third national lockdown the very same day. Johnson was forced to admit in his speech that children are a key vector for the virus!

Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the NEU, also claimed that the union always follow the science, but then stated there were differences of opinions in the scientific community. She quoted the Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty and Professor Neil Ferguson, who developed the modelling formula for the first lockdown that reopening schools is "the right thing to do".

Following repeated demands to know what the union was proposing to protect members, Bousted and fellow joint general secretary, Kevin Courtney, said they will monitor the infection rates in schools after the Easter break, and if the rates are high again they will call for a rota system to reduce numbers, a circuit breaker, if need be or "some sort of phased return".

This provoked comments such as, "This is a disaster waiting to happen," "This is a weak response", "nothing has changed, why are you asking us to go into work?", "So, wait until more deaths?" "You have given up," "I joined NEU in January because I thought you were going to fight. It's clear I have to fight my own corner".

Participants demanded a call for strike action. For several pages on the chat, the only word visible was "ballot" [for a strike], which the unions ignored, continuing their advice to "speak to your head teacher" and "have a conversation with your head and union rep". Someone commented, "Don't pretend you can't follow the chat, it's one word."

Bousted finally responded, saying, "I have looked at the chat line and people are saying 'ballot' and getting frustrated… The national executive discussed this and came to the conclusion that a national ballot is not the right way to go ahead. What is the right way to go ahead is to ensure school by school, that the return is as safe as possible. Given that infection rates are falling, hospitalisation rates are falling and given that the vaccine rollout is taking place, the executive agreed this is not the way forward."

She chastised the audience, "You can't simply say 'ballot' and expect it to take place… So it is an easy thing to say 'ballot', but that is not going to stop the school return on March 8 and nor is it something we think will be achievable, and nor do we think it is the appropriate action under these new circumstances."

The NEU then insisted that teachers do not use Section 44 without their approval. In January, educators were told by the NEU that the legislation provides a legal right to refuse to work if safety and wellbeing is compromised. No longer. With staff being forced to return to schools, the demand for workplace safety must now be policed by the trade union bureaucracy.

"We used Section 44, in January and it led to change of policy," said Bousted. "We can't say it is always the right decision in all circumstances. It is not sensible to use Section 44 without advice from your union's regional office. That is because the requirements that Section 44 has about having an imminent serious danger. You need talk to the union before you use that provision."

The trade unions act as appendages of the state and corporate management for the imposition of the ruling class's agenda of profit over lives. New instruments of struggle must be built in which workers organise independently to protect themselves.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established by the Socialist Equality Party to advance this perspective. We call on you to join and build a committee in your school and workplace. Attend our online forum on Saturday, March 6 at 2pm to find out more about the policies we advance for the closure of schools and, where they are forced to be open, the measures that must be adopted to protect lives.

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