

No to school reopenings! Build rank-and-file committees to save lives!

Education Rank-and-File Committee (UK)
6 March 2021

From March 8, schools and colleges will fully reopen in the UK with more than 10 million pupils, students and education workers in attendance. This will take place under conditions in which the *R* (reproduction) rate of the virus is just below 1—and is rising—and thousands of infections and hundreds of deaths are being recorded daily.

Everyone knows where Prime Minister Boris Johnson's criminal policy will lead. Within two months of schools reopening last September, 8,000 schools suffered coronavirus infections, with school settings accounting for 29 percent of all COVID-19 clusters. The infection rate among secondary school-aged pupils surged by 2,000 percent and 600,000 pupils were forced to self-isolate at home.

Another wave of disease is being prepared. The “added safety measures” for the March 8 return are a fraud. Neither masks nor testing are mandatory. Tests are woefully inaccurate.

The former head of the Ofsted schools inspectorate, Sir Michael Wilshaw, recently blurted out the government's murderous calculations by insisting that teachers should show “a similar commitment” to medical professionals, some of whom “have sacrificed their lives.” At least 570 education workers have been killed by COVID-19.

The reopening of schools and the economy last year was followed by a devastating second wave of the virus, which cost more than 80,000 lives. By December, school-aged children had the highest rates of infection in the country, alongside young adults.

At the time of the reopening in September, the Office for National Statistics reported that one in 1,400 people in England had COVID-19. The latest figure is one in 220. An estimate provided to the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies predicted that even a more gradual reopening than is planned could cost 58,000 lives by June 2022, despite the existence of life-saving vaccines.

School workers have been determined to oppose being treated as “Covid fodder” for the government's “herd immunity” strategy. But they have been undermined at every

turn by the Labour Party and the trade unions, who work as loyal enforcers for the corporations and the government.

Schools were first closed last March due to a mass rebellion of teachers and workers who refused to send their children to school. The unions called no action whatsoever.

The government used the breathing space granted by the first lockdown to carry out an unprecedented bailout of the corporations and the super-rich. They then moved quickly to force children back to school and their parents back to work, producing profits. Johnson announced plans for the full reopening of primary schools and partial opening of secondary schools in June.

This was met with overwhelming opposition. A National Education Union (NEU) poll found that nine in 10 teachers opposed the plan to reopen primary schools and over 400,000 teachers signed a petition opposing the reopening of schools without proper safety measures.

The education unions demobilised this opposition, making a pathetic appeal to the government to “step back” from its reopening plan. The government tried to proceed but was thwarted as schools and families refused to cooperate. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson was forced to delay a full reopening until September.

The Labour Party and the trade unions did all they could to bring school workers into line. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer penned an infamous article in the *Daily Mail* in August declaring: “I don't just want all children back at school next month, I expect them back at school. No ifs, no buts, no equivocation.” The education unions jettisoned their “five tests” for a safe reopening, sending their members back into schools without safety measures in place. Their only demand was for the government to outline a “Plan B” for when the inevitable explosion of infections took place!

When a surge of cases overwhelmed testing capacity in late September and October, the NEU, the GMB, NAHT, Unison and Unite warned the government that they were being undermined in their efforts to keep workers in schools. An October 3 NEU survey found that 84 percent of teachers did not trust the government to keep schools safe.

Johnson was forced by the spiralling pandemic crisis and the threat of a social explosion to declare a lockdown in November that excluded schools. NASWUT, the NAHT and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) did not oppose this decision. The NEU was pushed into begging for schools to be included in the lockdown, after its own petition was signed by over 150,000 teachers in 48 hours. Johnson ignored the plea.

On November 12, the NEU's national executive committee voted down a proposal to ballot for strike action. This information was leaked on Facebook.

With the pandemic catastrophic by the end of the December school holidays, the NEU called for just a two-week delay in the reopening of schools in the New Year. The education unions changed tack only in the face of a growing rebellion of school workers, reflected in a 400,000-strong attendance at an NEU meeting the weekend before schools were due to return.

To avoid industrial action, the unions advised their members to individually refuse to return to work by citing Section 44 of the workplace Health and Safety Act. Fearing a wider revolt in the working class, the government declared a third national lockdown, this time including schools, the next day.

Johnson's announcement of a "roadmap" to lifting the lockdown again demands the services of Labour and the trade unions to force education workers back into schools. Starmer declared, "Ideally I'd like to see all schools back open on 8 March and all children back in schools on 8 March."

At the NEU's latest mass meeting, on March 1, its leaders opposed repeated demands for strike action by claiming the "situation has changed, there are lower rates of infections, deaths and hospitalisations" and that strike action was not the "necessary, desirable or the right way to proceed." They also insisted that Section 44 must not be used without their approval, opposing the basic legal right of their members to a safe workplace.

A year of the pandemic has proved that workers cannot fight for their basic interests outside of a struggle against the Labour Party and the trade unions.

The same is true in every country. In recent months, planned action by Chicago teachers was betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union, paving the way for a reopening of schools across the US. A mass strike of teachers in São Paulo, Brazil has been sabotaged by the APEOESP union and wildcat French teacher strikes strangled by the French unions.

From these common experiences, workers internationally must draw the same conclusion: Building a new political leadership is a life and death question.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has fought throughout the pandemic to provide an independent programme for workers, based on the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions.

In an August 8, 2020 statement we called for "the development of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees to prepare for a general strike against the opening of schools and the murderous policy of the ruling class."

In September, we launched the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee "to unite all those opposed to the unsafe reopening of schools and provide the necessary leadership to prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the reopening of schools."

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands a full lockdown until the pandemic is suppressed, strict safety measures for genuinely essential workplaces, guaranteed jobs and wages for those required to stay at home, and a fully funded programme of online learning. This must be paid for by seizing the ill-gotten gains of the major corporations and the billionaires.

The reopening of schools is the spearhead of the government's plan for throwing open the economy, sending millions of workers back into unsafe workplaces to face infection and ramped-up exploitation. For the working class, therefore, the fight against school reopenings must spearhead a broader struggle against the pandemic and the deadly profit drive of the ruling class.

A network of rank-and-file committees must be established throughout the education and other sectors to defend workers' interests and fight for a political general strike against the Johnson government and a unified struggle with educators throughout Europe and internationally facing the same threat.

We call on all workers to register to attend today's meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to discuss this programme of action.



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