

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets as governments pursue reckless reopening of schools

Our reporter
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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held a powerful meeting Saturday with speakers from three continents, including three countries in the top-five internationally for COVID-19 fatalities—the UK, the United States and Brazil. Between them, these countries account for more than 900,000 of the 2.58 million worldwide COVID-19 deaths.

The meeting outlined an international strategy based on a socialist programme to confront the pandemic which has swept the globe due to the homicidal policies of capitalist governments.

Committee chairperson and special needs teacher Tania Kent opened the meeting saying, “The political tasks and challenges confronting educators in the UK are the same as for workers worldwide: the necessity for a unified international campaign of action to protect lives.”

Catastrophic consequences will follow the opening of schools, begun yesterday in England, before the virus is suppressed. Total UK deaths have passed 135,000 and Prime Minister Boris Johnson made clear that reopening the economy, including all schools, will lead to thousands more.

A statement published by the committee Saturday morning, Kent said, provides a “detailed chronology of key events and experiences of educators in the struggle to protect lives over the past 12 months.” The Labour party and trade unions were the key “political mechanisms” through which the opposition of educators and parents to the unsafe opening of schools was “strangled and dissipated.”

An online meeting of the National Education Union (NEU) on March 3 pitted the union against its members, who attacked the assembled union bureaucracy, opposed an unsafe return to classrooms and demanded strikes be called in opposition.

“What happened was a clear expression of the fact that there is a groundswell of hostility to the collaboration of the unions with the government’s reactionary policy,” Kent commented. “A change is coming. We live in extraordinary times and conditions. Organisations that have masses of members can collapse and those that are small can increase substantially.”

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, Kent continued, would “provide the necessary leadership to prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the reopening of schools.”

Jerry White, *World Socialist Web Site* Labour Editor and former presidential candidate for the US Socialist Equality Party, also spoke at the meeting. White plays a leading role in the organisation of rank-and-file committees among autoworkers, Amazon workers and teachers in the US.

He told the meeting that the US COVID-19 death toll has reached 530,00, and that Democratic party President Joe Biden is continuing the herd immunity policies of former US President Donald Trump—with the goal that all schools be opened by the end of April. This is despite the fact that “new immune-evading strains from South Africa and Brazil are on the rise [which] appear to have the highest prevalence among young children.”

The unions are backing the Biden administration, having recently betrayed the Chicago teachers’ strike.

White explained that the response of the ruling class to the enormous anger developing among millions of workers is, on the one hand, to build a fascistic movement—as seen on January 6 with Trump’s coup attempt—and, on the other, to rely on the unions to dissipate opposition. This is why Biden made the unprecedented call for Amazon workers to join a union.

The rank-and-file committees, White said, were “laying the groundwork for a powerful counter offensive by the working class,” inevitably posing “the need before millions of people to expropriate the private fortunes of the pandemic profiteers and reallocate society’s resources to meet human needs and not private profit.”

Former teacher and father of two, Kevin, spoke in the meeting to say that the Department of Education was enforcing school attendance, saying children are not at risk. He asked how to “counteract the lies, propaganda that’s coming from not just the papers and the mass media and the unions but the Department of Education.”

Kent replied that workers must “fight through the WSW and challenge all of these arguments ... and expand our readership.” Fundamentally, she explained, a new political leadership among educators must be built to combat these lies.

Kevin also noted that the Johnson government spent months hypocritically clapping “key workers”, who were disproportionately dying on the frontline.

In response, White said that the pandemic had exposed “the talk about ‘we’re all in this together’.” He continued, “Trump as well as the Democrats were briefed by the CIA back in February, they knew this was going to be a devastating virus,” while keeping the public in the dark. “Their greatest concern was... how to organise a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the stock market.” Amazon founder Jeff Bezos saw his wealth soar while “20,000 Amazon workers were infected; 250 meat packing workers and nearly 1,000 healthcare workers died.”

Teacher Tomas Castanheira spoke from Brazil, where the Socialist Equality Group has initiated a rank-and-file safety committee. The seven-day-average death rate in Brazil is over 1,400 and the

healthcare service is near collapse. “Fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro said Brazil will never have a lockdown,” reported Castanheira. “He said Brazilians are not cowards, and not afraid to die, and screamed: go back to work!”

Teachers on strike for a month in São Paulo voted on February 27 to continue their action against the murderous reopening of public schools in the city but were “facing a major bloc by the unions” who were sabotaging the struggle.

Ula? Ate?çi brought greetings from the Socialist Equality Group and Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey, where excess deaths have reached 98,000 since the pandemic began. Ate?çi explained how President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government opened schools last month, with the support of all parties and unions, “to get children out of their homes so parents can be sent back to work to produce profits for the corporations.”

Teacher Iona, a long-COVID sufferer and campaigner for Long Covid Kids, reported that he was giving evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus this week.

White cautioned against the “energies of educators and the working class being directed to appealing to the powers that be who represent a different and antagonistic class... bring this information to the millions of working people to mobilise them independently of these giant corporate controlled parties.”

Another attendee, Adam, asked why scientists have not opposed the fact that children and teachers will be in the last groups to be vaccinated? Kent replied that the elderly and most vulnerable should be vaccinated first and until everyone is vaccinated there should be strict lockdown with financial compensation and fully resourced remote learning. Just vaccinating teachers without the strictest public health measures creates the opportunity for vaccine-immune variants to develop.

Warren extended greetings from a US rank-and-file safety committee in Tennessee. He asked if participants could explain the response in the UK, Brazil and Turkey to the US’s government anti-Chinese propaganda claims that coronavirus originated in a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan.

Thomas Scripps of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) replied that the Wuhan-lab lie serves a dual purpose—to direct social anger outwards, and to whip up warmongering nationalism against the US government’s chief economic rival, China. He pointed to an article produced by the WWSW which exposed the *Washington Post* newspaper for repeating the smear without a shred of evidence. The WWSW article was censored by Facebook—with authorisation at highest state levels.

University PhD research student Frankie emphasised the committee’s opposition to censorship. A previous meeting “passed a resolution pledging to defend Florida whistleblower Rebekah Jones”, victimised “for exposing the truth about how rampant infections are in schools.” Behind the government’s bogus plans to guarantee “free speech” on campus is an attempt “to silence all criticism of its herd-immunity policy and pseudo-scientific eugenics.”

Committee member Helen, a teacher, gave an extensive report on research into lateral flow tests—to be used in secondary schools in order to maintain a pretence that schools are COVID-safe. Condemned by scientists as unreliable, the government nevertheless includes their results in daily infection figures.

Helen referenced leading Biostatistician Professor Jon Deeks’s opinion that “the best thing they could do with these tests was to hang them on the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square or, failing that, he

thought they should give them away to a country that didn’t have any PCR [Polymerase chain reaction] tests. In other words, if you had no decent testing at all in the country it’s better than nothing.”

She explained that Innova, the company providing the tests, specifies their use for symptomatic patients. The government’s mass rollout on asymptomatic individuals has not been evaluated and is therefore illegal.

Marcella, who attended the meeting from Argentina, described crumbling schools in that country and falling wages for workers. Teachers were offered a 12 percent rise when inflation is around 40 percent. There was money for International Monetary Fund creditors but none for vaccines.

A committee member from the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Committee emphasised the importance of exposing Biden and Johnson and their homicidal drive to reopen schools and the economy. Speaking about the UK, he said the “Eat out to help out [government scheme launched last summer] was one form of death; now open up the schools is a second form of death.” On average, more than one London bus driver has died each week during the pandemic.

The meeting concluded by unanimously passing the following resolution in support of the courageous struggle by WISAG workers in Frankfurt, Germany:

“The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee declares its solidarity with the courageous struggle of workers at the service company WISAG, in Frankfurt, Germany.

“Their campaign against sackings, wage theft and punishing working conditions—pushed through under the cover of the pandemic—is in defiance of the trade unions, who have abandoned the WISAG workers and isolated them from the wider German working class, driving some to a hunger strike to protest their treatment.

“The events at WISAG confirm the need for workers to build rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to defend their interests.

“We pledge to popularise the WISAG struggle. We urge educators and all workers to send messages of support to the strikers and fight to build rank-and-file committees in their own workplaces as part of the fight to unify the European and international working class.”



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