

Socialist Equality Party (UK) holds meeting calling for a network of rank-and-file action committees

Our reporters

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An April 10 meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) calling for a network of rank-and-file action and safety committees was attended by workers from many sectors including education, health care, transport, engineering, food and drink manufacturing, warehousing, services and the gig economy.

Also attending were a number of students. Greetings were brought by *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) US labor editor Jerry White and Gregor Link of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Germany.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties internationally are assisting workers everywhere in the building of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions that work on behalf of the employers and the government. These committees will provide the new and democratic organisations of class struggle workers need to stop the spread of COVID-19 and fight back against attacks on jobs, pay and conditions.

UK Socialist Equality Party Assistant National Secretary Thomas Scripps opened the meeting by warning of the dangerous new stage reached by the global pandemic and the policy of herd immunity still pursued by the world's governments, "repackaged as 'learning to live with the virus'."

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is reopening the economy, which means "not only a return to mass sickness and death, but to job losses, wage cuts and attacks on working conditions."

"This is the ruling class' ruthless class war strategy," said Scripps. "The most urgent political questions today is for the working class to organise around its own class war programme—seizing control of the wealth and productive resources of society and using them to protect all lives and livelihoods..."

"There are currently no mass organisations of working-class struggle. What masquerades under the name of the trade unions is a giant apparatus for suppressing industrial and political action. Building new fighting organisations of the working class can only be done through a determined insurgency against this apparatus. That means the setting up and expansion of rank-and-file committees, run by, and accountable to the workers, resolutely independent of the trade unions."

"Above all," Scripps explained, "this requires the fight for a new, socialist political perspective in the working class, for a massive redistribution of social wealth, the planned coordination of the world economy to meet human needs, and the necessary political struggle against the world's capitalist governments."

Jerry White noted that the US population had by that time suffered 575,000 deaths, the highest number of fatalities of any country. Cases are rising again in several states. It is under these conditions that the "Socialist Equality Party in the US has won increasing support for its call

for educators and other workers to build new organizations, independent of the corporatist unions, to fight this murderous policy."

Workers have joined a "growing network of national and international rank-and-file committees to organize the fight to save lives and oppose the brutal austerity being demanded by the corporate and financial elite, which is hollering that there is no money to save lives or pay living wages after receiving a multi-trillion bailout that has allowed US billionaires to increase their wealth by more than one-trillion last year."

White referred to the "defeat of the unionization campaign at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama yesterday, which exposes the extent of workers' alienation from the pro-corporate trade unions."

Workers opposed joining the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), even though US President Joe Biden himself had called for a vote in favour. "The operation to install the RWDSU at Amazon did not arise from a movement of workers from below. Rather, it was an operation of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the ruling class, and the state from above. The intervention of the Democratic Party and Biden reflects calculations within substantial sections of the ruling class that the working class can be better restrained by placing it under de-facto state guardianship within the unions."

Gregor Link explained, "In Europe, almost one million people have died of COVID so far, with 25,000 people currently dying each week. Tens of millions more will suffer long-term health problems and the consequences of increased exploitation and ruin..."

"Opposition in Germany—as across Europe—is widespread and growing... The night after [Chancellor Angela] Merkel and the state prime ministers refused to impose the necessary lockdown two weeks ago, the hashtag #generalstrike was the No. 1 most-discussed trending term on Twitter for more than three hours."

The SEP in Germany has established a network of rank-and-file committees for safe schools and workplaces and is fighting "to organize independently of the unions and reach out to workers all over the world. We intend to fight for a general strike that includes and unites workers across Europe and beyond to shut down schools and non-essential production. All affected workers and small business owners must be completely recompensated."

SEP (UK) member and special needs teacher Tania Kent spoke on behalf of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee established last September. "It was clear from the beginning of the pandemic that the fight against its deadly impact and the protection of lives could not be left in the hands of the Labour Party and the trade unions, who supported the policy of herd immunity and the protection of profits over lives."

The Committee's founding statement said its purpose was "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.”

Kent said, “This continues to be the essential task before workers. The launching of a network of committees today is an essential step in providing this leadership and programme across all industries.”

Claire, a high school student, said that at her school, “we have assembly twice a week with about 300 people” and “masks are not enforced at all.”

SEP member and bus driver Miles Driver said, “Among key workers, London bus drivers have suffered one of the highest death tolls from the pandemic. More than 60 drivers have needlessly died from the pandemic over the last year...”

“If anyone listening believes the unions can be reformed, or pressured to the left, or forced to fight for our interests, I urge you to consider the experience of bus workers with Unite.”

“On April 10 anger turned to fury after Unite, the union, which covers 20,000 bus drivers in London, sent thousands of letters to drivers stating that PPE was ‘not recommended’. The letter was signed by Unite Official John Murphy along with the head of Transport for London and top bus company executives.”

“In September, as a new wave of infections developed in the garages, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee was established... The Committee has enabled workers to begin to act in their own interests. Our initiatives in defence of safety forced the companies and Unite on the back foot at a number of garages, exposing Unite’s role as an industrial police force for Transport for London and the Johnson government.”

Rory Woods, an SEP (UK) member and nurse at an NHS hospital, told the meeting, “I have been involved in the SEP’s NHS Fightback campaign since its founding in 2012... Our experience during the pandemic, as well as over the last four decades, shows that workers cannot place any faith in the unions. If I were to list all the sell-outs carried out by the Royal College of Nurses, it would take more than an hour.”

“Last month, when the Johnson government proposed an insulting 1 percent pay offer for health workers, the RCN union was quick to announce a strike fund of £37 million. This was simply to appease the 450,000 members... That hot air has gone now. There’s no talk of a strike anymore.”

The unions had said there would be a “fight” for workplace safety during the pandemic, but “tens of thousands of staff have contracted the virus. Around 1,000 health and social care workers have died of COVID-19 over the last year. This is 1 in 150 of the deaths that occurred in the UK! Sadly, two of my colleagues are among the dead.”

Lucia, a parent, raised the issue of long-COVID: “The latest figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show one million sufferers and one in ten educators and I can see that situation getting much worse as everything opens up.” It is estimated that half of children will become infected unless safety measures in schools were drastically improved. “Children, educators, and their parents are being used as cannon fodder for short term economic gain.”

Lucia added that there are still “a lot of vulnerable people in this country who are unvaccinated.”

Dennis, a worker in further education, said he had been “assured” he and his colleagues would work in separate bubbles before the first return to work, but “within a month” he was being asked to cover for someone across a bubble. After the second lockdown, they were told there would be no bubbles. Tutors are currently being asked to work up to 7.30pm every evening.

WSWS UK editor Robert Stevens detailed the privileged existence of the trade union bureaucracy, with Certification Office records for 2019/20 showing that the union bureaucracy controlled assets worth £2.2 billion. “The annual financial returns of the unions show that 22.1 percent of unions paid a salary to their general secretary of over £100,000; 19.2 percent paid between £60,001 and £100,000; 10.7 percent paid between

£30,000 and £60,000.” The average pay of 29 union leaders on more than £100,000 a year was £153,935 in 2019.

The unions, Stevens explained, “seek at all times to suppress the class struggle, which is the greatest threat to their privileged existence. In 2019/20 the Unite union, with over 1.2 million members, held 245 ballots. But from these the outcome was only 25 strikes or actions short of a strike. The other of the two largest unions, Unison, held 234 industrial action ballots, also leading to just 25 strikes or actions short of a strike.”

WSWS writer Tony Robson spoke about the GMB union’s betrayal of the British Gas workers’ struggle, warning that due to the refusal of the unions to mobilise workers behind their strike, hundreds would be sacked in a fire and rehire operation. He insisted that “the growing militancy of workers must be given an organised and political expression and that’s why today’s meeting is such a significant step forward.”

School teacher Helen, a union rep in a primary school, said she had been fighting for safety in her school but was given no support by her trade union. “The harassment from the school and from the head teacher” had resulted in “a major impact on my mental health and the union has isolated me as much as the school has done... I have networked and found that my case is just the tip of a very big iceberg”.

Scripps concluded the meeting by noting a question posted asking if the “Corbynist wing” of the Labour Party set up a new party, whether it is “likely that the unions would switch their funding from Sir Keir Starmer’s party to a new left party?”

Scripps answered that Corbyn and his co-thinkers had no intention of leaving the Labour Party. “The political function of Corbyn, and the so-called Labour left, is to serve, as has been proved time and again, as a trap. They are trying to drag leftward moving sections of workers and youth back to the Labour Party where they can be politically neutralised and disposed of.”

“We place no confidence whatsoever in any section of the Labour Party... This is an organisation which is viciously hostile to socialism and to the most basic interests of the working class. A genuine workers’ party, the Socialist Equality Party, has to be built and it has to be based on socialist principles and the complete political independence of the working class.”



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