

UK teaching unions stifle fight against pandemic and attacks on jobs and conditions

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The UK's two largest teaching unions, the National Education Union (NEU) and NASUWT, held their annual conferences this month.

The conferences followed a year in which schools became major vectors for the transmission of a virus which has killed over 150,000 people in the UK, including hundreds of school workers. They were held amid government threats to attack teachers' working conditions by lengthening the school day, cutting pay, and leaving schools severely underfunded.

The purpose of the conferences was to whitewash the role played for the NEU and NASUWT in creating this catastrophe, while signalling that the union bureaucracy would continue in the same corporatist role in support of the government.

No reference was made to the close to 600 school workers killed by COVID-19. The unions have never so much as kept a record of their members who have died, leaving the government to deliver manipulated statistics at months-long intervals.

NEU Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney had the gall to say that his organisation had "saved lives" and that "NEU members have turned to their union. They have sought advice, information and protection. And their union has been there for them."

NASUWT claimed the union had "helped teachers through the pandemic by providing information, advice and support, and making the strongest representations on their behalf to employers and to governments."

Courtney and fellow general secretary, Dr Mary Bousted, repeated throughout their joint speech to the conference, "We were right". The NEU was right, they said, "to argue for schools and colleges to close to most pupils last March", "that there should have been a two-week autumn half-term as a 'circuit breaker'", "that schools should have been included in the November

lockdown", "that schools in Greenwich should be allowed to close the week before Christmas", "that primary schools should not re-open on 4th January in the middle of a pandemic".

What rotten cynicism! The NEU "argued" for school closures by issuing for-the-record statements and then refused to organise action among their 400,000 members, despite having an overwhelming mandate to do so. The only time schools were closed was when both the government *and* the education unions were forced to accept defeat by a threatened rebellion of teachers and parents. Each time they were reopened, it was done with the support of the unions against the wishes of school workers. The results have been catastrophic.

In practice, the education unions marched in lockstep with the government and the employers and sought to prove their usefulness to them.

Dr Patrick Roach, NASUWT general secretary, was most explicit, telling his members, "Through your actions, many employers have come to recognise the value of working with the NASUWT, and that, in order to get through this crisis, we all have to work together." He added, "Throughout the last 12 months, on your behalf, we have continued to reach out to those employers and governments that were willing to work with us."

Bousted and Courtney lamented the fact that the government did not work with them to adopt their "education recovery plan" for reopening schools.

The line-up of the unions with the government was best summed up by NASUWT's inviting Conservative government Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to speak at their conference.

There are no two people in the UK more closely

associated with the drive to reopen schools. In December, Williamson threatening to take local authorities to court for advising schools to close early when case numbers rose to unprecedented highs. Starmer told the *Daily Mail* last August, “I don’t just want all children back at school next month, I expect them back at school. No ifs, no buts, no equivocation.” He insisted schools remain open during the November partial lockdown.

The NEU, which tries to strike a more militant pose than NASUWT, was not so stupid. President Robin Bevan attacked Williamson as a man “who issued High Court injunctions in order to stop pupils from staying at home at a time when schools all across the country were being ravaged by COVID-19.” But these criticisms in word only highlight the union’s complicity in deed. Not a single strike was organised against the threat of coronavirus in schools, even after this declaration of war by the education secretary.

Both conferences parroted the government’s line that the pandemic is essentially over, with Bousted referring to being there for children “post-COVID” and to “the return to school” becoming “the new normal”. Roach said, “Alongside Government plans for easing lockdown restrictions, we want to see the Government’s road map, not just for the next few months, but a road map for exiting the pandemic and securing the longer-term recovery.”

This is said when the world is recording more daily new coronavirus cases than ever before, with dangerous new variants circulating widely, including in the UK, demanding immediate and coordinated global action to suppress the disease. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his scientific advisers have repeatedly acknowledged that the UK will suffer another surge this year.

The unions condemned the government’s refusal to raise teachers’ pay—meaning a real terms cut—and the increase in workload but refused to organise any action in response. Roach “called on the Government to come forward with a plan for a teacher-led education renewal.” The NEU limited any talk of action to a single indicative ballot on longer working hours, which gave a glimpse of the militant sentiment in the rank-and-file the union is keeping under lock and key. The vote was 94 percent in favour of strike action.

No fight will be organised by the NEU. Courtney said only that the union would “make this case nationally to

Government and to employer bodies.” The union would “take the motion on workload... and give our reps the tools to bargain for good work in schools and colleges, MATs [Multi-Academy Trusts] and local authorities.”

Dripping with cynicism, Bousted declared that “teachers don’t mind working hard. The profession already works the most unpaid overtime of any profession, with working weeks regularly exceeding 50 hours, and 55 hours for leaders.”

Not a word was said, let alone action organised, about the ongoing victimisation of staff and union members, despite the list including members of the NEU’s own national executive!

The past year has proved beyond all doubt that the trade unions are utterly hostile to the interests of their members. These are well-paid bureaucracies enjoying an intimate relationship with the government, dedicated to suppressing social and political opposition in the working class.

Courtney and Bousted were paid £143,528 and £152,377 in the year to August 2020 to run an organisation with a £55 million-a-year income and over 500 staff members drawing close to £33 million a year in salaries, social security and pensions. The top four members of staff were paid over £560,000. This immense apparatus held 32 ballots for industrial action in that year and carried out just six strikes.

Roach was paid £153,872 in 2019 (more recent figures are not available).

School workers must build their own organisations—independent of the trade unions, democratically accountable to the workers themselves, and prepared to join up with workers nationally and internationally to fight for their needs. The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, established by the Socialist Equality Party, is leading this struggle.

Register here for a meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee this Saturday at 14:00 (GMT+1).



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