

# Support striking teachers at Oaks Park High: For a united fight against victimisations and the unsafe reopening of schools!

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK)  
28 June 2021

*The following statement was distributed this morning to teachers picketing at Oaks Park High School in East London.*

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee stands in solidarity with teachers at Oaks Park High School, fighting to defend colleagues victimised for upholding their rights to a safe workplace during the coronavirus pandemic.

Amid a second wave of the pandemic in January and with schools identified as a major vector for the spread of Covid, 26 staff members invoked their rights under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act to remove themselves from danger and teach online. The school's headteacher and Senior Leadership Team responded with denial, intimidation and victimisation. Four teachers who took part in the Section 44 action had their employment terminated, including a newly elected union rep who was frog-marched from the school. The union rep remains sacked.

The stand taken by staff at Oaks Park High was part of mass action by school staff nationally on January 4 as tens of thousands of educators invoked their rights under Section 44 to a safe workplace. It was this which forced the government to make a humiliating U-turn less than 24 hours after Johnson had insisted that "schools must stay open". On January 5, all schools were shut to all except the children of key workers and vulnerable children, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson publicly admitting that "schools are a key vector" in virus transmission.

The impetus for the Section 44 action was mass opposition by educators toward the unions' refusal to call strike action to protect staff. Schools which threatened to close were targeted for legal action and threats of fines under the Coronavirus Act. Some 400,000 members of the National Education Union (NEU) participated in an online

rally, the largest online trade union meeting in history, as members demanded the closure of all schools.

The union opposed any strike action and instead advised that teachers could invoke Section 44 on an individual basis following legal advice. NASUWT, the second largest union with 400,000 members, opposed the calls for Section 44 telling members that if they took such action the union would not protect them, thereby dividing staff.

The January lockdown was used to dissipate opposition by the unions while they prepared, yet again, for another full reopening of schools as demanded by the government. Throughout the January lockdown, school attendance rose dramatically compared to the first lockdown. Early Years educators and special needs staff were forced to open to anyone who wanted a place and the definition of "key worker" was expanded so broadly that many schools reported 10-60 percent attendance, up to 10 times higher than the previous lockdown.

On March 1, just days before the ending of the lockdown, the NEU organised another mass online rally to impose the government's demands for the full reopening of schools. The NEU's only demand was a pathetic appeal to Johnson to stagger the reopening for two weeks instead of the "big bang" demanded by the government. Just 17,000 educators attended this second online meeting. Teachers were disgusted at the union's refusal to demand a full closure of schools amid high infection rates—at least 570 educators had already died from Covid. During the meeting, members insisted the union should "ballot" for strike action and were attacked by joint General Secretary Mary Bousted who declared, "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 insisted that no further action must be taken under Section 44, without the union’s approval, which clearly was not going to be forthcoming considering they had deemed that “schools are safe”.

Oaks Park staff are victims not just of the employers. The unions created the conditions for the most militant sections of workers to be identified and picked off in preparation for the full reopening of schools in March, which the unions fully supported.

The NEU conference held in April did not raise a single word about the plight of victimised reps, including those in executive positions such as Kirstie Paton in Greenwich and Louise Lewis in Huddersfield, relegating their struggle to a “fringe” meeting organised by the victimised individuals themselves. Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney made a three-minute appearance claiming the reps were victims of rogue employers, concealing the murderous herd immunity agenda of the government and emphasising the NEU’s desire to work with school heads who were victimising teachers. “We have thousands of workplace reps and many thousands of member reps and management interactions are good. Why don’t they come and talk to us, our reps are experts, they want to talk sort problems that is what we do, if they have a problem they should come to us,” he said.

The victimisations at Oaks Park are not just the actions of a local head, they are government policy. Schools have been kept open as the lynchpin of efforts to end national lockdown measures and drive parents back to unsafe workplaces. But there is a further chilling aspect to this policy. Newly released documents show that the UK’s Cabinet Office asked the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE) to model “herd immunity” through a “resurgence” of infection in young people. Schools have served as the test bed for this homicidal policy.

As more contagious variants of Covid spread throughout schools, data reveals major risks to children and staff:

- Child COVID-19 hospitalisations continue to rise, up +19 percent in a week to June 21.

- 7 percent of all COVID-19 hospitalisations are children and one in every 100 child cases of COVID-19 are hospitalised.

- One child in every 30 at state school was out of the classroom on 17 June, including 9,000 pupils with confirmed Covid-19 cases, 16,000 with suspected cases, and more than 7,000 whose schools had shut entirely

because of Covid outbreaks.

- Long-Covid is affecting 7.4 percent of infected children 2-11 and 8.2 percent of infected children 12-16

The NEU, NASUWT and other education unions have continued their collusion with the government to keep schools open, in line with the pro-business agenda of Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party. Staff at Oaks Park have protested the actions of Labour-run Redbridge Borough Council whose leaders have lined up with the sacking and victimisation of teachers. But Redbridge council’s disgraceful actions echo Labour’s role nationally as a de facto coalition partner with the Johnson government.

It is time to organise a fightback! We urge Oaks Park teachers to break the stranglehold of the NEU and form an independent rank-and-file committee. This will enable you to turn out, contact victimised colleagues in other schools and unite with teachers and parents everywhere who are facing the same attacks.

In one recent struggle after another, including at British Airways, British Gas, London buses, the private rail franchises, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Weetabix and many more, workers face “union” organisations committed to the suppression of the class struggle and the maintenance of corporate profits at workers’ expense. The same is true throughout the world.

The pandemic that has claimed more than 4 million lives globally shows the failure of capitalism. We appeal to teachers at Oaks Park to base themselves on a conscious struggle to unify the working class in every country against the common capitalist enemy, in the fight for socialism.

*We urge teachers and parents who support this fight or who would like further discussion to contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and attend our public forum on July 10, 2 p.m. Click this link to register.*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**