

UK teachers with Long COVID face victimisation

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Latest government data from a React-2 study by Imperial College London found there are two million cases of Long COVID among England population of around 56 million. Long COVID covers those people still suffering symptoms more than 12 weeks after infection.

The UK's COVID-19 death toll has passed 152,000, but the Conservative government lifted most safety restrictions on May 17. Cases since then have surged, fuelled by the spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant.

This has allowed the virus to spread among young adults and school children in particular, and others who are either unvaccinated or have not received the two required jabs.

Yet, despite scientists predicting a catastrophic rise in hospitalisations and deaths without the strictest public health measures, the government is intent on lifting all measures to mitigate the virus, including mask wearing, by July 19. It is impervious to the suffering inflicted, including the long-term effects of the disease.

The React-2 study found that women and those admitted to hospital were at greater risk of Long COVID, and the prevalence of symptoms increased with age. It also found a correlation between deprivation and the risk of developing Long COVID.

University College London and King's College London carried out a separate study which found that symptoms persisted long after the initial infection in one in six middle-aged people, falling to one in 13 among younger adults.

A survey in Norway published in *Nature* magazine found that out of 312 patients, 61 percent had persistent symptoms after six months—including 52 percent of 16-30-year-olds.

A brain imaging study conducted by the University of Oxford and Imperial College London found damage to brain tissue in COVID patients, suggesting a possible a

predisposition to dementia and Alzheimer's at a future date.

Despite this, teachers and other workers who fight for health and safety face victimisation from employers. Several National Education Union representatives were sacked during the pandemic for invoking the right to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act, leading to walkouts.

The education unions have done nothing to defend their victimised members and have abandoned those with Long COVID to their fate, prompting them to take matters into their own hands. Part-time Media studies and Photography teacher Kodoma founded Facebook support group Teachers With COVID UK. Aged 52, she has been suffering from Long COVID since March 2020, and said it was “a disease I caught at work which could easily have been prevented.”

Kodoma told a WSWs reporter that by the end of May, “I was really ill for weeks. I can't really remember it. I slept. My two adult children had to check my SATS [oxygen saturation levels] a few times a day. It feels like your lungs are on fire, like someone is leaning on your chest; every breath is a real effort. I knew I was fighting for my life.”

Kodoma was not just fighting the disease but her employers, with virtually no help from the National Education Union (NEU). She explained how at some schools like her own, teachers with Long COVID are bullied by management to return to full-time work over a phased four-week period before they are fit, with no support in place. Many return due to financial pressures as their sickness pay diminishes, which, coupled with the stress of it all, exacerbates the illness and leads to relapses. If they do not comply they are forced to resign.

“I went back to school in September,” said Kodoma, “walking on a frame, though doctors said I was not ready to go back. I lasted a couple of days. Towards the end of

December, I had a formal absence meeting. When you get to the third formal absence meeting, you either have to accept ill health retirement or lose your job. They said I couldn't have more than 10 days off sick over two terms, then I could have gone to the second stage. I was saved by lockdown."

"I've sent the NEU so many emails, saying I'm really struggling, I'm frightened, please help, but got no reply."

Kodoma decided to take matters into her own hands and founded the Facebook group. "It's much more help than the unions," she said.

She noticed that some teachers in the group were "getting better and better and others got worse and worse. "Some schools get taxis for staff, so they don't have the commute to work, flowers, mobility equipment, a gradual phased return and remote teaching, even paying for two members of staff. One in the group, a head of year, highly qualified and experienced, she had a short-phased return [to work], with no accommodation timetabled, she had to work upstairs. I think she got fired.

"We are passionate about our courses and want to be doing our jobs. It's crazy that we are not being accommodated for."

As the only media and photography teacher in the sixth form, Kodoma had to set and mark this year's exams. "Because we have teacher assessed grades this year, I had to do all the marking and create my own exams. It set my health back. The school environment is just not safe."

Before being forced to resign last Saturday from his post as health secretary for abusing the government's own advice on social distancing, Matt Hancock responded to the latest data by acknowledging, "Long COVID can have a lasting and debilitating impact on the lives of those affected." But in the face of what is a growing health time-bomb, the government has pledged only £50 million into Long COVID research. This is a pittance compared to the £37 billion squandered mainly on the private sector to develop its failed track and trace system, or the £17 billion given to Tory cronies to provide personal protective equipment.

Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady stated that Long COVID should be recognised as a disability. "It's time to recognise this condition properly—and make sure workers who are living with Long COVID get the support they need to do their jobs," she said.

This conceals the fact that it was only with the support of the trade unions and the Labour Party that the government was able to keep much of the non-essential

economy open for business during the pandemic and has done nothing to mobilise their millions of members against an unsafe reopening. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer insisted last summer that schools be reopened, "no ifs, no buts, no equivocations".

The education unions have played a pernicious role, maintaining the fiction that schools can be made COVID safe while suppressing opposition by parents and teachers who favour remote learning until schools are safe.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators and parents to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to take forward the fight for a rational response to the pandemic based on science, including the closure of all educational settings and non-essential workplaces until the virus is suppressed.

Tens of billions of pounds must be given over to resource remote learning. The necessary funds must be provided for research into Long COVID. No teacher should be victimized for raising awareness about COVID in schools, and those with Long COVID should be given all the support they need on full pay, without their jobs being threatened.

Such a fightback can be successful only if waged independently of the unions, as part of a united struggle for socialism with workers in all sectors against capitalism's subordination of lives to profit. Spearheading the fight in Britain is the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, who are campaigning for the reinstatement of victimised bus driver David O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan was sacked for demanding for COVID safety at work and is fighting to link up his struggle with that of workers in other sectors, including educators.

To attend the next online public forum of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday, July 10 at 2pm BST, register here .



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