

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee holds online forum as Johnson government lifts all safety restrictions

Our reporter
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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee held an online meeting Saturday, to outline a response to the pandemic based on science and the need to protect the health, livelihoods and lives of working people. It proposed a programme on which to oppose Prime Minister Boris Johnson's herd immunity policies that have sacrificed 150,000 lives to protect profit.

As the global death toll surpasses four million, public health restrictions are being scrapped in one country after another while more transmissible variants such as Delta spread exponentially.

Tania Kent, a Socialist Equality Party member, special needs teacher and chairperson of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, explained the aim of popularising "the call made by the International Committee of the Fourth International for the establishment of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to organise the global fight back."

She explained how UK prime minister Johnson had declared, in ending Covid restrictions, "I want to stress from the outset that this pandemic is far from over. There could be 50,000 cases per day."

Support group Long Covid Kids reports 59 paediatric deaths due to COVID and 9,000 children with long COVID extending beyond 12 months.

"A government that claims to be acting in the interests of children," said Kent, "is allowed to oversee the deaths and suffering of young children, with no challenge from what passes as the official organisations of the working class."

Labour Shadow Health Secretary Jonathan Ashworth has complained that the government's announcement "isn't a guarantee that restrictions will end—only what it will look like."

The National Education Union (NEU) released a press statement asking the government, "Are there any thresholds on case numbers, or hospitalisation or deaths that mean the DfE would do something different in schools in September? We all know the results of dither and delay."

"To call a social crime of unprecedented scale 'dither and delay'," said Kent, "exposes the unions as nothing but an arm of the government in imposing social murder. Their main

concern is the reopening of schools being jeopardised, not the threat to lives."

"The international working class must act to take the response to the pandemic into its own hands, based on the fight for a socialist programme," Kent concluded.

Tomas, a teacher and member of the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil, told the meeting, "Yesterday, the government registered 1,500 new deaths, which brought the death rate in Brazil to more than 530,000."

Coupled with economic hardship, this has "provoked a wave of social opposition. Over the past month, Brazil has seen three days of massive protests. Hundreds of thousands marched against the homicidal policies of President Jair Bolsonaro's government."

Bolsonaro "discouraged the wearing of masks and social distancing; promoted drugs without scientific proof as quack cures; encouraged disobedience of 'lockdown' decrees and sabotaged the vaccination campaign."

"In São Paulo," Tomas continued, "100 educators and three students died in state schools. Some 3,000 children under the age of 10 have died in Brazil."

"A month ago, São Paulo's municipal educators unions broke a four-month strike against reopening schools. Two days ago, the state teachers in Minas Gerais declared a strike against the reopening of their schools."

Attendee Warren asked what are "the best tactics in the ongoing struggle?"

Kent answered, "There aren't any quick solutions. We don't diminish tactics, [but] the essential issue is the building of a new leadership and new organisations, rank-and-file committees—the most effective way for workers to discuss policies that will protect them—the closure of schools and strikes."

Another attendee informed the meeting that despite being "double vaccinated with Pfizer, I've recently contracted Covid. I tested myself on the way to a family gathering with older relations and found I was positive before I got there. Being vaccinated doesn't stop you getting and spreading Covid!"

London bus driver David O'Sullivan was dismissed from his

job for informing his colleagues about their rights under Section 44 during an eruption of COVID cases at his garage. He thanked “teachers and educators for the support for the public campaign against my unfair dismissal and the actions I took to uphold my safety and that of my co-workers at Cricklewood bus garage in London.

“The reopening of schools in September was a major factor in tragic and preventable deaths of at least 60 bus drivers in London.

“Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and Transport for London are among the guilty. They issued a directive which exempted school children on public transport from social distancing measures and face coverings.

“This has been guaranteed by the Tripartite Agreement, which Unite signed with Transport of London and private operators, which placed ‘operational efficiency’ over the protection of lives.

“I joined teachers on the picket line at Oaks Park secondary school in Redbridge, London, taking selective strike action since June 15, demanding the reinstatement of four colleagues dismissed for standing up for safety.

“The four teachers invoked Section 44, the right to refuse to work in conditions which present a serious and imminent danger, in opposition to resuming face-to-face teaching.

“The strike at Oaks Park shows the readiness to fight but the action has been isolated by the National Education Union.”

SEP member Henry Lee, a PhD graduate student, reported, “The government announced that from July 19 there will be no restrictions on face-to-face teaching in universities in England, based on the lie that vaccination levels have ‘broken the link between infections and deaths’. Students travelling between campuses and homes will spread the Delta variant.

“Young people aged 18-20 were offered a vaccine from the middle of June, making it unlikely that a large percentage will be fully vaccinated.

“The government and universities’ ‘concern’ for the mental health and education of young people is proved a lie by attacks on courses. Scores of universities announced the cutting of arts, humanities, languages and social science subjects which do not line up with the demands of the labour market.

“The UCU and NUS unions renounced opposition to the reopening of campuses and attacks on education. The UCU general secretary described opposition to marketisation as ‘a bit niche’, and the president of the NUS told students, ‘nobody cares’.

“The UCU lists a dozen disputes on its website but justified its isolation of these struggles as a ‘tactical question’.”

Mother of three and former primary school teacher Lucia told the meeting, “One in 12 children [have Covid symptoms] for longer than 12 weeks. About eight percent of children may be left long-term disabled. It concerns me that it causes brain changes. The narrative is that children aren't harmed, even though we've had over 750 children admitted to intensive care

with PIMS [Paediatric Inflammatory Multisystem Syndrome].

“I've been campaigning to improve mitigation measures in school, in particular ventilation. Classrooms don't meet the legal requirements. They far exceed safe limits for the amount of carbon dioxide because they're densely occupied spaces with limited window openings. Some classrooms can't open windows. CO2 monitoring will help assess the issue, but it won't solve the problem, we need money for air filtration systems.”

Addressing Lucia's concerns about “parents not fully understanding the seriousness” of the threat, Kent referred to the massive government and media propaganda that schools are safe, and children do not get COVID.

“Parents are not responsible for this situation,” she said. “Information is important in terms of educating people, making sure that the correct scientific evidence is distributed.

“But most parents were forced to send their children to school because they cannot survive without working. You have to tackle all these challenges—like being able to isolate on full pay.”

SEP Assistant National Secretary Thomas Scripps made an urgent appeal to join the fight “for a mass movement of the working class to free imprisoned journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

“We have been discussing how to organise opposition to an enormous crime carried out by governments. A key front in that war has been the battle over the truth.

“The US is seeking Assange's extradition and imprisonment for life for his commitment to the truth and exposure of some of the most consequential lies of the 21st century.”

To join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee click here.



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