

“As a former teacher, I am stunned by the inaction of the unions”

UK parent describes being victimized for keeping child away from unsafe school

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This is the third in a series of interviews with UK parents and educators opposed to the reckless reopening of schools. Part 1 is here and Part 2 is here. We urge all parents, educators and workers seeking to organise opposition to this homicidal policy to join and build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees in the UK and internationally.

Claire Cozler is part of parents' advocacy group SafeEdForAll (Safe Education For All). She attended the August 22 *World Socialist Web Site* online discussion with leading scientists, “For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives.”

She said, “I think mitigation is an option to reduce spread, while we sort out global solutions, but not an ultimate answer. Truthfully, the only way that I see to a global solution is a vaccine patent waiver and a worldwide production and vaccination strategy, in a similar way to polio or smallpox.

“That said, we do need those mitigations in British schools until we can finalize a vaccine for the under 12s, and one that is effective for immunocompromised and immunosuppressed people.”

Asked about Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's herd immunity policy, Claire said, “My thoughts on the Johnson administration are probably unprintable. I am a former Labour Party candidate, and I have seen this country heading downhill since 2010. Brexit exacerbated that and gave dangerous right-wing views an 'acceptable' face.

“I campaigned extensively, and I warned that this was what would come next, but no one listened. Since Johnson's arrival in 2019 that descent has become a slalom, and we, the thinking people of this country, feel abandoned and drowned out by the strident right-wing agenda, promulgated through the mainstream press. Never have I seen a regime do so much to wreck and loot a country. Their 'British Exceptionalism' will kill us all, one way or another.”

On the role of the trade unions during the pandemic, Claire replied, “As a former teacher, I am stunned by the inaction of the unions. Schools are workplaces like any other, and the role of a union is to protect their members. If they had come out fighting, we, the parents, would have had a campaign to back up and not been forced to create our own. We don't just want to protect our children, but school staff as well. A few of us are ex-teachers so we know the score.

“I am also horrified by the lack of opposition provided by the 'opposition', the political parties, unions, and professional bodies. They have all given Johnson carte blanche to do as he pleases. Our organisation [SafeEdForAll], as many others, was forged from sheer desperation that nobody was listening. But we have found a network of similar organisations all over the world, covering both parents and teaching staff, and made active links with them.

“It is sad that those traditionally tasked to protect us, the unions and the opposition, have failed to step up. I think this also shows a move from top down to bottom-up politics—grassroots organisations with their fingers on the pulse, that are a lot faster than often unwieldy national organisations. Maybe this is the way forward? But now we have led the way, we would still appreciate some of the 'big guns' backing us up. We have the authentic voice, but they have the political clout.”

Claire said she had noted “support for the ordinary person drop away, from traditional parties and unions... and have had personal experience of it. The gradual demonisation of minorities, from people of colour through to people with disabilities (I am disabled), the same with anyone poor, being labelled as a societal failure. Globalisation and big business have fueled this, the attitude that if you are no longer earning, you aren't worth keeping alive. Any attempt to change this has been fought tooth and nail by this capitalist system, supported ably by their press.

“You are beginning to get the shoots of independent organisations, which are beginning to fight this,” she continued. “We are fighting against often overwhelming odds. They are the way forward, but it won't be an easy one.”

Asked about the drive of governments' globally to reopen schools, Claire said, “They know damn well that the most financially disadvantaged will also be in the most risky jobs. They will also be in the most multi-generational households, with the least space.

“They know that if children contract the virus it will wipe out entire families. But to be honest, they don't care. They think that we are expendable. They aren't living in these communities, their children don't attend the same schools, they won't be subject to the same sanctions, and they can afford lawyers. Above all, they have the luxury of space, which we don't. I live in a poor area of a poor community in the north of England. I have a horrible feeling it's like World War I again. We are literally cannon-fodder to them.

But to do that to children is particularly pernicious and immoral.”

School openings were a “recipe for disaster,” continued Claire. “British schools have been underfunded for decades. They have always suffered from poor ventilation. Any teacher will tell you that every infection rips through them every time. I had everything from nits to norovirus. But now it's even more serious. They have done nothing. We are approaching two years now and they have just ripped everything away.

“This will be carnage, especially in poor areas. No masks, no ventilation, no filtration, no distancing, no remote education, no isolation of contacts and 'thresholds' of 10 percent infection for action [the latest government guidance]. This won't be pretty. All our kids will have between them and perdition is a bottle of hand sanitiser.

“And this insistence on attendance! So many poorer, and less well-educated parents are forced into sending children into school. A proposed 'crackdown' on home education! A campaign of gaslighting safety, propaganda that the less questioning parents will believe too. Our fear is that this will not end well. Especially with no vaccinations under the age of 16 and only one dose for the 16-17s. We will be a breeding ground for mutations... AY3 [a mutation of the Covid Delta variant] is already here.”

Opposing government intimidation of parents aimed at forcing them to send their children into unsafe classrooms, Claire explained, “At my school, since the beginning, there were threats, fines, etc. My son was forced back in December 2020 for 18 days.

“Because of that, I didn't get to say goodbye to my father. He died of COVID in December 2020. Ironically, I didn't go to see him because I was scared we would give it to him, but my anti-mask brother did that.

“Then the school were even worse [from] December-May 2021, culminating in a revenge referral to Social Services in the week that I finally decided to deregister him. I am clinically vulnerable [CV], my son is CV and has special educational needs [SEN], he is autistic and has other health issues.

“Other parents have been threatened with prison and tagging. It's a postcode lottery. Too much responsibility is left to the County Council, and Tory ones use that to make money again, with privatised Academy Trusts being another issue, and head teachers.

“Some head teachers have used this as a power grab, as did mine. The problem is all relationships with the school have now broken down, so I will also have to find my son a new school, which will destabilise him enormously. It's sad, because he had great relationships with his support staff and that has all been destroyed.

“The problem is that they have used a 'one size fits all' approach. Not all families are equal, especially those with CV/CEV [clinically extremely vulnerable] members and SEN children, and definitely not those from disadvantaged communities. It's cruel, but then this is a continuation of the Tories' austerity agenda.”

Referring to the government's attempt to deny children from poorer families their entitlement to free school dinners during lockdown in 2020, Claire said, “I think that their attitude to feeding children in lockdown summed it up. They didn't want to. It took a footballer [Marcus Rashford] to get them to feed poor kids.

“We are literally collateral damage to them. If a few of us, or a

few of our kids, die, they don't care. The nastiest irony is that my father gave Johnson his vote, and it basically killed him.”

Asked about the WSWS online meeting, Claire responded, “I think the thing that has struck me the most was the scientists absolutely unequivocal stance on keeping your children home to keep them safe if you can. That contrasts starkly with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health here. They have been backing the government to the hilt, which I would argue puts their Hippocratic Oath seriously in question. Their first concern should be the protection of children, not the protection of a corrupt regime by keeping parents in work no matter the cost in children's lives.

“My son's paediatrician refused to back me with my son's school, despite both of our health conditions. He said to me in terms too childish for my eight-year-old that 'kiddies don't have the same cells as grownups and can't catch COVID' before backtracking and saying it was like the flu—even though he knew my ambulance driver had been moving sick children.

“I think that made the attitude of the international experts stand out,” continued Claire. “They are talking to parents and educators, not at them. They want to work with them, and not against them. They see we are all on the same side and we can achieve so much more by working together for a Zero Covid elimination strategy.

“They also see the bigger picture, that children are being sacrificed for economic reasons, a fact which is either omitted or flagged as 'fear-mongering' here. And they are also very aware of the dangers of the right-wing, anti-vax movement and their disinformation. Here they are part of the well-connected mainstream so scientists will go on programmes with them. They need to be no platformed, because of the risk to lives and the future. The 'freedom' ethic is putting us all at risk.”



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