

“The unions’ inaction to protect their workers and children in schools is scandalous”

UK teacher and parent denounce education unions as schools reopen

Tania Kent, Evan Blake
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This is the fifth in a series of interviews with UK parents and educators opposed to the reckless reopening of schools. Part 1 is here, Part 2 is here, Part 3 is here and Part 4 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.

Helen Clarke, a teacher and parent, spoke to the WSWS about her recent experience of the pandemic.

“As a parent, I’ve spent the summer in a state of almost constant anxiety as cases where I live have skyrocketed and stayed stubbornly high. I knew this would happen when [Prime Minister] Boris Johnson removed all restrictions, but it’s like living in a bad dream and I just don’t know what to do for the best for my family.

“I have teenagers who are doing GCSE and A level courses. They are in the age group which has consistently had the highest rate of infections ever since schools reopened. We can’t home educate them at this stage of their learning and they are young people who need some independence and time with their friends. But neither has had the chance to be fully vaccinated and me and my husband are both clinically vulnerable. I worry about them getting sick. I worry about one of us getting sick.

“Last year was stressful, getting through each week, each term safely. But schools have never been fully open with infection rates this high before. And Delta is the dominant strain. And no masks. It’s madness. They can wear a mask but no one else will be. Living in the UK is like a nightmare you can’t wake up from.”

After fighting for the safety of herself and her colleagues at work, Helen was victimised by her school employers and abandoned by her trade union. “I’m also a teacher. As a union rep in my school, I was victimised

early on in the pandemic for raising health and safety concerns and lost my job as a result.

“The union let me down badly and this summer has been like a re-run of last summer. The top leadership has said and done nothing all summer except issuing grovelling thanks for a handful of CO2 monitors which will only tell us what we already know: that UK classrooms are overcrowded, poorly ventilated death-traps on which action should have been taken well over a year ago. Meanwhile the union itself continues to peddle the government’s lies that Covid doesn’t really affect children, in spite of 1,000 hospital admissions a month and a significant number of deaths. Their own members, hundreds of whom have died, don’t seem to matter.

“Schools and colleges are now the only workplace in which women are not able to work from home from the 28th week of pregnancy onwards. Many are not vaccinated because until recently they were advised against it by health professionals. Pregnant women are getting very sick and dying here as a result. I’m appalled to see women, children and families being treated in this way.”

Asked about the August 22 online meeting “For a global strategy to stop the pandemic and save lives,” hosted by the WSWS, Helen said, “The online meeting was an excellent opportunity to hear honestly and clearly from some of the best scientists from all over the world. Professor Michael Baker, who advises the New Zealand government, really made it clear that what they and some other countries have done was to follow the advice of WHO [the World Health Organisation] and the example of how an elimination strategy worked in Wuhan. He just assumed everyone would read the WHO report from Wuhan and follow an elimination strategy. The shocking

thing is that the rest of the world didn't bother.

"Lisa spoke for all of us when she explained how dangerous UK schools are and how frightening it is to be a parent or educator here at the moment. The virus is being allowed to run rampant, all mitigations have been removed and anyone who keeps their child away from school faces fines, 'welfare' visits to their homes and threats of social services or court action. This is the real danger to our mental health, as well as the danger of the virus to our physical health. It's a constant source of stress and anxiety."

Daniella Modos-Cutter is a parent and one of the founders of the SafeEdForAll (Safe Education For All) website and blog. She told the WSWS, "My son is clinically vulnerable and hasn't been to school since March 2020. I will not play Russian roulette with his life. I'm also immunocompromised. I've been campaigning for well over a year for safety mitigations in schools.

"We are opening schools without any mitigations except hand washing for an airborne virus and no isolation for close contacts. Johnson has issued the policies to suit the minority with libertarian ideologies, not the many. He is running a hybrid herd immunity plan to protect the vulnerable but run Covid through the younger population as fast as he can, even though Johnson knows 8 percent of children suffer from Long Covid and the Delta variant is more dangerous to them. It's now basically the kids' Covid gamble."

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

Daniella described "The unions' inaction to protect their workers and children in schools" as "scandalous. I'm unsure what can be done other than refuse to send children into school until mitigations are put in place. [There should be] universal mask wearing unless exempt, social distancing even if that's through half the children staying home and the other half attending in-person learning. Remote learning should be offered to all who wish to keep their children home and not risk infection, without the threats of fines and being referred to social services. There should be HEPA filtration and CO2 monitors and vaccinate children who are eligible for the vaccine 12 years old and over. We must vaccinate and mitigate against the harms of Covid in children."

Having attended the August 22 WSWS online meeting,

Daniella said, "I found it very informative, and it cemented my decision that I was doing 100 percent the right thing not sending my child [to school] in September. I've kept him home since March 2020 and I won't risk his life or future health in any way. In my opinion we are not in the 1900s anymore, you can pick up education at any point in your life. What's the point in education if you're dead or disabled through Long Covid? I'm disabled with multiple health problems, three autoimmune conditions—I would not wish it on my worst enemy."

"I agreed with Dr Gasperowicz. We need schools to stay closed until there is minimal community transmission and vaccinate and continue with public health measures. The meeting showed that the scientists have really cared about children's health."

On the political situation, Daniella commented, "Parents and educators confront governments who have populist leaders who won't make the hard decisions for the greater good and bow to big businesses pressure instead of the need for public health.

"Sending children back to school I believe is purely economical, getting parents in work and working more hours even though this will be a false economy as it will end up in a lockdown in the UK. We are going to see a huge wave of infection, Long Covid and deaths in the UK, and I hate to say it but this time it's a pandemic of the children. I fear they will take the brunt of this, especially under-12s as they can't have a vaccine.

"I think Rank-and-File Safety Committees are a good idea and need to be done as the unions are not proactive but reactive. Kids' health and lives are being risked as well as teachers' lives."



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