“I refuse to send my daughter into an unsafe school where she is at increased risk of becoming ill and potentially developing Long Covid.”

As Covid cases soar, UK parent tells WSWS why she is deregistering her child from school

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This is the sixth 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, Part 4 is here and Part 5 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.

Helena Wallace is a civil servant from Northwich in Cheshire, England and has taken the decision to home school her 13-year-old daughter Cora next term.

She told the WSWS, “I’ve been uncomfortable with sending my daughter to school during the last academic year. It was patently clear to me that school children can catch and spread the virus, particularly where they are crammed into classrooms with 30 other students.

“But at least then some mitigations were in place such as mask wearing, year bubbles, and policies on isolation if close contacts tested positive. To think that we are heading into the new academic year, with a more contagious and more dangerous variant, with none of these mitigations… well, it makes no sense to me.

“I was very unwell in March 2020 with a virus that left me bedridden and exhausted for weeks,” she continued. “Testing was less available back then, but I strongly suspect that it was Covid-19. 18 months on, I am still suffering the long-term effects of this illness, and I refuse to send my daughter into an unsafe school where she is at increased risk of becoming ill and potentially developing Long Covid.

“I had heard about other parents keeping their children off school, and them being threatened with fines or prosecution. I believe this approach is very unfair, particularly to those parents and children who are clinically vulnerable and for whom catching the virus means a much higher risk of mortality.

Helena described how she discussed and agreed deregistering from school with her daughter and husband, enrolling in a number of distance learning courses and joining a local home education community.

“I appreciate that we are lucky that we can provide this alternative education for my daughter,” she said, “since we have the flexibility and funds to support her. For many families, they may not have this option, and are forced to send their children into an unsafe environment even if they don’t want to.”

A recent letter from Helena’s daughter’s headteacher detailed the school’s scrapping of bubbles, distancing, masking and isolation requirements. “I don’t blame the school for this. I blame government and the Department for Education for not requiring that these simple protective measures continue.

“Another concern was the statement by the school that they ‘will be mindful of good ventilation’. This is not good enough! Schools should be funded so that they can purchase effective HEPA filters for every classroom. It simply is not enough to just open a window when we are dealing with a highly contagious variant, which is primarily spread through the air.

Referring to the government’s propaganda offensive, Helena explained her view that “many parents will be sending their children back to school in September not fully aware of the risks that Covid poses.

“Early on in the pandemic the message given by the government was that children cannot catch Covid, cannot spread Covid, do not get ill, and do not die. 18 months later, we now know that this is not the case. However, this belief seems to have remained.”

Helena stressed that “Eight percent of children develop Long Covid, and currently the Delta variant is putting one percent of children in hospital. There are 8.9 million children in school in the UK, so eight percent of 8.9 million is a lot of children.” She also emphasised the devastating impact the pandemic is having on the National Health Service (NHS).

“Our NHS [National Health Service] is already on its knees

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thanks to government cuts and the strain Covid has placed on it so far. I don't think it has the capacity to care for thousands of sick children if cases rise in September when the schools go back. It is what we saw in September 2020, and we are seeing this in Scotland right now after the school term began a couple of weeks ago.

"What is particularly worrying is that Covid cases are 26 times higher than they were one year ago, we have a more worrying variant, and this Bank Holiday thousands of people were at festivals which will only fuel the spread of the virus within the community. More children will get sick, more children will spread the virus, and this will mean an increase of cases among the more vulnerable members of the community.

"Even if hospitals are not completely overrun by patients, there will be a clear impact on deaths which could have been prevented and also effective care for other patients, such as those with cancer. We may get to the stage where schools are forced to close due to rising cases, which will impact on children's vital education even more than it has already."

Asked her opinion of the Conservative government's response to the pandemic, Helena said, "We have been truly 'world beating' in terms of cases, deaths, and an approach which shows a complete lack of regard for the value of life. This government does not care about deaths; 'let the bodies pile high', as [Prime Minister] Boris Johnson said. For the nasty party, the bottom line is always money, and this is what has guided all decision making and policy.

"This government wants everyone back to work, sitting on cramped trains, fuelling the economy again, and tens of thousands of deaths are seen as a small price to pay for that." Helena said she was "shocked at the level of corruption that this party have displayed" and that, though she hoped a Covid Inquiry would scrutinise its actions, "the way things are at the moment I'm not sure if this will happen."

Regarding the role of the Labour Party, Helena said, "I have been very disappointed in the Labour opposition's response to Covid and the government. There was a real opportunity for [party leader Sir Keir] Starmer to hold the government to account, but this just didn't happen. Instead, he seemed to roll over and support everything Boris Johnson did.

"I was particularly frustrated to see him pressing for schools to re-open, without calls for effective safety mitigations to be put in place to protect children. I don't feel that the Labour Party has done a good job of representing me, or my views on the pandemic. More widely, I definitely don't feel that the Labour Party has done a good job of representing the average working citizen and those who are genuinely concerned about this push back to normality."

Helena continued, "Despite the fact that herd immunity simply does not apply to a virus like Covid-19, and the uproar back in 2020 when they tried to pursue this as an approach to the pandemic, it's been clear to me that this is back on the table again but by stealth. By promoting the idea that the pandemic is over, and by removing requirements like mask-wearing and social distancing, this government is gently nudging people back to behaviours that will increase the spread of the virus.

"This is the same with schools. Many believe that their children will not be affected by the virus, or that they don't transmit it. By not vaccinating children in time for the start of term, the spread of virus will increase again. Studies have shown that even in those individuals who suffered only 'mild' illness, brain scans showed a loss of grey matter and neurological deficits. By opening schools in September with no mitigations in place to protect them, I can only come to the conclusion that the government deliberately wants to infect them [children] and fuel the pandemic further. I am not prepared for my daughter to be a part of this.

"The government does not care about us or our children. It does not care about the most vulnerable members of our society, particularly those it considers to not be 'economically active' or of benefit to it. Research shows that people who are poorer, or those who are from ethnic minorities, are disproportionately more likely to suffer the effects of or die from the virus.

"We must stand up and fight for all members of society and ensure that everyone is protected from the heartless policies of this government. I wish that all governments had taken Covid-19 seriously when it first emerged. Those countries that did, such as New Zealand and China, are faring much better than countries that didn't, such as the US and UK.

"I believe that a Zero Covid approach would mean that fewer people would be affected by the virus, be that directly (e.g., fewer people would die from the virus) or indirectly (e.g., hospitals would have the capacity to care for patients with non-Covid related illness). My fear is that the UK's approach of allowing the virus to run riot through our population could result in the emergence of a new, more dangerous variant. This may render current vaccines ineffective, and ultimately result in more deaths, damage and disruption in the long term."

Helena concluded, "I believe that recent threats, such as the Covid pandemic and the climate crisis, show that the current world economic model does not work. We need to take a sustainable approach to how we do things, and one which places its people at the centre. I worry about the future for my daughter and her friends, and I would like to see a viable political alternative that looks to the future and provides solutions to the big global problems that we face."

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