

Mass infections threatened as students return to UK campuses

Henry Lee
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Over the next weeks, one million students and tens of thousands of staff will return to university campuses under conditions in which the COVID-19 pandemic is raging out of control. Casting aside even the dishonest promises of a “safe return” from 2020, the ruling elite intends to expose students and higher education workers to the unrestricted spread of the virus.

Despite the insistence in the media that young people are safe from COVID-19, its long-term impacts are only beginning to be understood. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated at the start of September that around 110,000 people under the age of 25 were suffering from Long COVID. Of these, 26,000 reported that they had symptoms at least 12 months after initial infection. The ONS found that most young Long COVID sufferers reported that their symptoms limit their activity. An estimated 46,000 young people described the impact as limiting their activity “a little”, and 13,000 “a lot”.

Public Health England’s “Weekly national Influenza and COVID-19 surveillance report” for the week to September 12 estimates that only 65 percent of young people aged 18 to 25 have received at least one vaccine dose, and only 48.9 percent are fully vaccinated, leaving large numbers extremely vulnerable to infection.

The reopening of campuses with no restrictions on the spread of the virus is not only a reckless experiment with the health of students, but increases the risk of dangerous new strains emerging. When the government announced the lifting of all COVID safety restrictions in July, the Co-Director of the Centre for Genomic Research at the University of Liverpool, Steve Paterson, warned, “Letting a virus rip through a partially vaccinated population is exactly the experiment I’d do to evolve a virus able to evade immunity”.

Last week, there were reports of 19 UK cases of the more transmissible Delta variant with an E484K mutation associated with greater resistance to vaccines.

Even before most students have arrived on campus, outbreaks are already being reported at multiple universities. University College London announced that in the week beginning September 6, 10 students and four staff tested positive. Even earlier, in the week beginning August 30, 10 staff and four students at the University of Manchester tested positive.

While students have suffered in the under-resourced and largely unplanned move to online teaching, the demand from the government that face-to-face teaching must resume with no restrictions has nothing to do with defending education. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s only concern is to advance the murderous programme of herd immunity by mass infection, in service to the profits of the corporations.

The same claims to be defending a normal university experience and standard of education were made last year, with the government and universities promising “COVID-secure” campuses. In reality, students were herded into crowded dorms to keep tuition and accommodation fees flowing. Once the inevitable outbreaks took place, they were scapegoated and subjected to brutal policing, forcibly quarantined in their dorms in appalling conditions—in at least one case with a fire door sealed shut.

This year, universities have even more explicitly treated students as “cash cows”. Desperate not to lose the tens of thousands of pounds in tuition fees paid by each international student, more than 50 institutions arranged charter flights to bring 1,200 young people from China to the UK. They are planning to arrange more according to the *Sunday Times*.

The government’s claims to be concerned for student’s education are belied by its plans to slash arts and humanities funding in half and overseeing the closure of courses and whole departments. University managers have meanwhile carried out a wave of job losses, with

figures obtained by education platform Edvoy showing over 3,000 redundancies were made between March and September 2020 alone.

Students and university staff are in this position thanks to the treachery of the education unions. The University and College Union (UCU) has worked to suppress all opposition among academics and support staff opposed to working on unsafe campuses.

At Cardiff, members of the union branch voted in an indicative ballot in January to take industrial action, including a strike, if they were forced to work on campus. This was never organised by the union, with the local UCU website now declaring it is waiting for an “act of good-will empowering workers with a choice about face-to-face work”. Indicating the worthlessness of its “indicative” ballots, it adds, “if necessary, we will run a [strike] ballot in the Autumn to protect members who do not feel safe returning to face-to-face working on campus.”

The UCU and other campus unions have played a similar role in demobilising their members in every university. During the first lockdown in 2020, the UCU, UNISON, Unite, EIS and GMB put out a joint press statement with the Universities & Colleges Employers Association, committing the universities only to “consult” the unions and “use government guidance ... as the basis for their response to the Covid-19 pandemic.” The document agreed that the unions would enforce a reopening as long as this inadequate guidance was followed.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has said nothing about fighting for COVID safety on the campuses and takes no position on the return of students. The last press release issued by the NUS mentioning COVID-19 was in April. Endorsing fraudulent claims that lectures can be made “safe” with a few mitigations, the NUS says, “We believe that students should be back on campus when it is safe to do so and would like this to be grounded in scientific advice.”

The unions are holding back a tide of opposition. In a global survey by *Times Higher Education* issued this month, only 28 percent of respondents said they felt safe returning to in-person teaching or on-campus working this term, and 53 percent responded “no”. Underscoring the total lack of faith in the “safety measures” worked out between universities and the unions, 78 percent said that they were concerned the return of in-person teaching will lead to a spike in coronavirus cases in their area.

Showing how workers are seeing through the anti-

scientific propaganda which insists young people are safe from infection, the survey reported that it was younger workers, in the 18-34 age group, who were the most dissatisfied with their employers’ preparations to stop the spread of COVID-19 on campuses. *THE* reports that many respondents were nervous because of a lack of transparency, after having spent the last year and a half being lied to about the risks and spread of the pandemic.

A majority of respondents to the survey were from the UK, but the international response indicates that workers everywhere face and oppose the same dangerous conditions.

This sentiment can only find organised political expression independently of the trade unions and the pro-herd immunity Labour Party. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Educators Rank-and File-Safety Committee are fighting to organise rank-and-file committees of students and education workers which can take up the struggle against COVID-19. Such a struggle must be carried out based on a programme of *eliminating* the virus. There can be no “return to normal” while COVID rips through the population killing over a thousand every week and debilitating thousands more.

On August 22, an international panel of scientists brought together by the *World Socialist Web Site* for an online discussion, “For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives!,” made clear that a policy of elimination is not only possible but necessary to end the pandemic. This policy requires closing workplaces, including universities and colleges, coupled with full compensation to workers and the provision of high-quality online education—all to be paid for out of the pockets of the corporate and super rich pandemic profiteers.

To join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, [click here](#).



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