

An important step forward in the fight against the pandemic

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Reflecting the growing opposition in the international working class to the homicidal pandemic policies of the ruling elites, on Friday British parent Lisa Diaz issued a video statement via Twitter calling for a nationwide school strike in the UK on October 1. Under conditions in which over 59,000 British children were infected with COVID-19 in the first two weeks of school reopenings, she encouraged parents to take independent initiative to keep their children at home and safe from the virus. The video has now been viewed over 75,000 times, liked over 2,350 times and retweeted over 1,340 times.

Lisa, who is a member of the Safe Education for All (SafeEdForAll) group and works with the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, has received a large following on Twitter in response to her videos denouncing the Boris Johnson administration's criminal school reopening policies. Enacting the "herd immunity" strategy of letting the virus rip through the population, schools across England have no mitigation measures whatsoever. In Friday's video, Lisa stated, "We're sick of the lies. We're sick of the gaslighting. We're sick of you paying scientists to say ridiculous things like children don't catch it in school, they catch it on the bus. It's not good enough. We won't take it anymore."

The call for a UK school strike is part of a growing wave of resistance by the working class, which is entering a new stage of the class struggle. It requires the support of workers in every country and efforts must be made to coordinate similar strikes and workplace actions internationally.

This development arises out of the profound crisis of world capitalism, which has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Since January 2020, a staggering 4.76 million people have officially died from COVID-19, while the real global death toll is estimated to be above 15 million. At present, every day roughly 466,000 people test positive for COVID-19 and nearly 8,000 people officially die from the virus worldwide.

With vaccine production and distribution subordinated to the profit interests of the pharmaceutical giants and the

geopolitics of imperialism, only 32.6 percent of the world population is fully vaccinated, the vast majority in the world's 10 richest countries.

Contrary to the claims of sections of the ruling class and the unions in each country, the pandemic cannot be contained by vaccinations alone, through limited public health measures, or a haphazard combination of the two.

In many countries, including large parts of the US controlled by the Democratic Party, schools have been fully reopened with mask mandates and other mitigation measures, with the virus still spreading rapidly. Wherever mitigation measures have been put in place—including in New York City, Los Angeles and elsewhere—they are quickly being scrapped in order to maximize children's time in school. The reason for this, as with school reopenings as a whole, is to send parents back to work in order to sustain corporate profits and the enrichment of the financial elite. In the first 18 months of the pandemic alone, America's billionaires amassed \$1.8 trillion, a 62 percent increase in their collective wealth.

The teachers unions in every country have facilitated the reopening of schools, allowing thousands of children, educators and their family members to die worldwide over the past year. In each country, the unions have either done nothing to oppose school reopenings or been the most active cheerleaders in this process. In the US, as record numbers of children became sick and died from COVID-19, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten completed a 20-state "Back to School for All" tour in August to push for fully in-person instruction.

The central significance of the October 1 UK school strike is that it has been organized independently of the unions and capitalist political parties and has evoked a powerful response among parents and workers worldwide. It makes clear that the fight against the pandemic is increasingly taking the form of social struggles by the working class, which must be consciously organized and unified through independent rank-and-file committees.

In the US, over 1 million children were officially infected

with COVID-19 in the past five weeks and an average of three children and at least three educators are dying from the virus each day. Parents and educators in Chicago, New York City, Detroit, and from California, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Washington and other states endorsed the call for a UK school strike and are planning similar protests in their school districts. Rank-and-file committees of educators and parents from California, Washington, Texas and Tennessee met over the weekend and will issue statements of solidarity with the UK school strike this week.

In addition to educators, over 2,000 carpenters are on strike in Seattle, Washington, in a fight against the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC) union, which has imposed concessions contracts for decades. Autoworkers across the US have formed rank-and-file committees independently of the corporatist United Auto Workers (UAW) in order to struggle for improved living standards and working conditions, including the shutdown of production amid the rampant spread of COVID-19.

In Germany, major struggles among transit workers, health care workers, airline workers and other sections of the working class have erupted in recent months. As COVID-19 cases once again surge amid the full reopening of schools, many parents and educators in Germany have endorsed the call for the October 1 UK school strike. Peggy, the mother of an adult severely disabled son and a school-aged child with asthma, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “It’s very important! We should join this! For the protection of our children! #ParentsStrike on 01.10.2021!”

Last week, roughly 30,000 Sri Lankan health care workers staged a nationwide protest to demand improved workplace protections against COVID-19, in defiance of the government’s anti-democratic laws forbidding such action. They joined roughly 250,000 teachers across Sri Lanka, who have been on strike for over two months to demand higher pay.

In Canada, which has entered its fourth wave of the pandemic amid the full reopening of schools, parents in British Columbia are preparing solidarity demonstrations with the UK school strike this Friday. In Alberta, the hardest-hit region of the country with 6,964 active cases among youth under 20 years old, hospitals are at 87 percent surge capacity and on the cusp of having to triage care. Doctors and scientists in Alberta are calling for a “firebreak” lockdown, with the hashtags #FirebreakAB and #GeneralStrikeAB now trending on Twitter.

Commenting on the international response to her call to action, Lisa Diaz told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I’ve had amazing support from parents and workers all over the world! It’s wonderful to know I am not alone, that there are other parents who see through their government and media

lies that COVID is somehow a benign illness in children and it’s okay for them to get it. That’s the lie being perpetuated in the UK anyway.”

She added, “There is no ‘living with COVID’ because millions of people will end up dead. Millions more will live with the debilitating symptoms of Long COVID. We can’t negotiate with this virus. We have to obliterate it. This is not a pipe dream. It is achievable. We just need the political will. We need a Zero COVID strategy. There is no middle ground.”

Indeed, the science is clear that COVID-19 can be eliminated in any given geographic region—as has happened in China, New Zealand and other countries—and ultimately eradicated worldwide. The necessary measures, however, will only be implemented through the mass mobilization of the working class, organized through rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and capitalist political parties.

Wherever COVID-19 is spreading, these committees must fight for the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces, universal masking, testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients and all other public health measures to cut off the chain of viral transmission. Workers affected by lockdowns must be guaranteed full income protection, to be paid for by the massive profits accumulated by the rich during the pandemic.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), established on May Day 2021, will fight to unify the growing struggles of all workers across industries and national boundaries. The call for the October 1 UK school strike marks a significant initial step forward in the fight to eradicate COVID-19, from which workers will draw inspiration. Similar actions must be prepared in every industry and in every country, as part of a globally-coordinated struggle of the international working class to end the pandemic and save millions of lives.



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