

UK parents, educators and health workers declare support for October 15 school strike

Our reporters

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Claire Cozler, a parent, former teacher and member of SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All), spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) about why she is supporting the October 15 school strike:

“We cannot go on like this. 800 people a week are dying, and in schools last week 200,000 children were absent through COVID. 1 in 14 secondary pupils have it, that is 2 per class, and the current isolation rules mean that siblings of infected children and teachers whose families are infected still have to come to school/work. 94 children have died in the UK during this pandemic, and 12 of those have been in the last month alone. Over 50,000 children are now suffering from Long COVID...”

“The only way as parents that we can make them listen is to strike. We have tried everything else, which is why I am supporting the school strike. Enough is enough.”

Speaking about the previous, October 1, school strike, Claire told the WSWS, “I thought the global show of solidarity on the last school strike was amazing. The messages of solidarity coming in showed that we are not the only parents experiencing this, even though most of the countries still have some mitigations in place. Videos and messages from across the world: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and as far as Mexico, the US, Japan and Australia.”

Claire explained that “The messages from teaching staff were especially heartening, as our campaign has always wanted to protect not only children, but school staff and families too. To know they were behind us was wonderful. Many of us are former teachers, and we know what they are going through, and to take that time out to support us was particularly appreciated!”

Referring to the National Education Union (NEU)’s refusal to back the strike and joint general secretary Kevin Courtney’ disavowal of any action over unsafe schools in the future, Claire told us she was “extremely disappointed... As I said, we have always been a campaign

to protect everyone in education, from children, to staff, families, and their communities, and it was incredibly sad to see that they did not support this.”

She said of the UK Education Secretary, “Nadhim Zahawi can push for attendance all he likes, but the sad truth is that dead children can’t attend school. Neither can chronically ill children without the level of support that Mr Zahawi is unwilling to fund...”

“Using truancy laws to force people to send their vulnerable children into hotbeds of infection will achieve nothing but making parents more angry, and even more determined not to place their children at this level of risk. Record numbers of education staff are also leaving and asking them to police this will only make more of them leave.”

Claire drew attention to the particular plight of clinically vulnerable (CV) and clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) families:

“CV and CEV parents and children are being hung out to dry. Guidance is being applied across the board with no variance for individual family vulnerabilities and circumstances. One size does not fit all. Postcode and headteacher lotteries are not on. And fining people for not complying with putting their child or family at an increased risk is not going to work...”

“Vulnerable parents are used to standing up for their rights and fighting for treatment. They aren’t just going to blithely increase their risks overnight because Mr Zahawi says so. Let’s be honest, the life of a child would be blighted even more by losing a parent. 8,886 children are already in that situation, having lost a parent or primary caregiver...”

Claire continued, “Any number of threats are not going to push people who have stood against the odds for years to suddenly give up the fight now. But still the Government have been threatening them. Organisations such as SafeEdForAll and Fighting for Vulnerable Lives

have been inundated with requests for support from families facing threats and have been supporting them.”

Describing her own situation, Claire said, “Today, despite all my precautions, and the fact that I have been at home since March 2020, the level of COVID in the community is such that I am unwell and have been advised to get a PCR test by my GP, as she fears that I have COVID again... I had it in the extremely early days and am already suffering from Long COVID from the first time.”

Claire cannot order a test as there are none available and cannot risk public transport. The nearest walk-in centre is over five miles away. “If they can’t organise tests, or tracing, or reducing community levels properly, why would we trust them with the lives of our children, the very thing that is the most precious to us?”

Chris Porter, a university lecturer in Britain, told the WSWS, “As a parent and educator, I’m offering my support for the school strike on October 15.

“This is, as far as I can see, the only organised action aimed at challenging the herd immunity policy that is systematically putting at risk the health and lives of children and adults. There seems little challenge to the dominant, dangerous message that the vaccine on its own is protection enough, not even from unions who you might think via their rhetoric and supposed aims would put social and human need ahead of economic imperatives.

“Parents and workers, as well as many students, who are concerned about returning to places of education where the spread of COVID-19 is now to be expected and even invited, face fines, loss of employment, or lack of sufficient remote learning arrangements should they choose to prioritise those health concerns. These are structurally imposed contradictions in service to the herd immunity policy, so it’s heartening to hear about even single days of resistance and the messages of solidarity from around the world.

“A school friend of my 9-year-old daughter had his primary school place withdrawn because his parents understandably refused to expose him and his vulnerable brother to that risk.

“Home schooling, only months ago seen as a valiant, collective effort, now seems to be treated as an irrational, almost criminal choice by concerned parents, and taken off the table as a way to stay in touch with school work and teachers during a crisis that should have lasted only months, but which is being turned into a permanent state through the prioritisation of profit over social need.”

Helena Wallace, a civil servant from Northwich in Cheshire, England, took the decision to home school her 13-year-old daughter Cora this term. She explained, “I wholeheartedly support this Friday’s school strike.

“It was great to see the breadth and depth of support for the strike on 1 October, both in the UK and internationally. I am particularly horrified to see the policy of deliberate infection of our school children is now in full swing. This dangerous policy has already resulted in the deaths of British schoolchildren, including that of 15-year-old Jorja Halliday.

“Countless more will inevitably suffer the consequences of Long COVID, in addition to the preventable infection of CEV and CV relatives within family homes. I am relieved that my child has been withdrawn from school and so will not play a part in this government’s murderous approach to so-called herd immunity.

“I hope that this week’s strike will raise awareness of the risks among other parents, in addition to hammering home that our children’s lives are not expendable.”

A doctor who works in the National Health Service in north west England told us, “I will be joining the school strike. My two kids have got the virus, they’re isolating in their rooms. I am so angry! My wife [also a doctor] and I have been going into hospital for 18 months. We didn’t get the virus. I have seen patients who were infected.

“School is a culture medium for the virus. I saw on the BBC empty chairs in classrooms. Most parents in the UK are panicking about sending their children in schools—and they will fine us. When 1,000 children get the virus, for one or two it will be a huge issue, morbidity. The situation in this country is deadly because of the criminal policy of the government. They started by letting old people die and now they’ve created problems for the kids.”



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