

Corbyn, Covid and school reopenings: A record of silence and political betrayal

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UK parent Lisa Diaz is the driving force behind the Friday school strikes, encouraging parents to, when possible, keep their children off school to protest schools being made unsafe by the pandemic.

On October 30, she tweeted asking, “Has Jeremy Corbyn spoken out about the tragedy unfolding in schools and I have missed it? I like Corbyn. He’s a good man. Asking this genuinely...”

She added later, “I like Corbyn. We would have been in a much better place if he was PM and not Johnson. I campaigned for Corbyn in 2019. But now don’t have any political affiliations. And I’m not falling for anything. He has been rubbish on schools. Like the rest of them. Gotta be honest”.

Diaz wasn’t alone in asking why he was silent in the face of the deaths of over a hundred children from COVID and continued mass infections, with somewhere between 2 percent and 14 percent likely to suffer from Long COVID as a result. April May, replied, “I thought about this earlier, and genuinely confused considering the damage his brother is causing...”

Corbyn’s brother, Piers, who he has never once criticised, is the leading figure in the anti-vaccination and pro-herd immunity protests led by far-right forces, many with close ties to the Conservative government and the Trump wing of the Republican Party.

It was to be expected that Diaz’s post would solicit attempts to defend Corbyn from those who have learned nothing from his five years as leader of the Labour Party—years that saw him betray the political aspirations of his millions of supporters for a struggle against the Blairite right and the Tories, and for socialism.

The defence involved clutching at a few straws and excuses for his miserable cowardice.

Links were sent to a September 19, 2020 *Skwawkbox* article, hailing a tweet from the former Labour leader under the heading, “Corbyn enters fray over school return in implicit rebuke to Starmer’s failure.”

Corbyn speaking out “publicly on the catastrophe of coronavirus outbreaks in schools” consisted of a single sentence, “With a growing amount of infections in a growing amount of schools and nothing being done to protect members those deaths will be the responsibility of this negligent government”—a quote from an article by Unison’s Assistant General Secretary Roger McKenzie.

Rather than entering “the fray” (Corbyn would not recognise a fray if he fell over one), Corbyn was endorsing the pose of opposition by Unison represented by McKenzie’s pledge to

support “any member that refuses to return to work in an unsafe workplace” while the trade unions organised the reopening of schools.

To call this an “implicit rebuke to Corbyn’s successor as Labour leader” was pure sophistry. Corbyn has never rebuked Sir Keir Starmer on anything, including his support for school’s reopening after last year’s first lockdown, “No ifs, no buts” and Starmer’s sending what *Skwawkbox* called, “a secret letter pledging support on the back-to-school plans of a PM [prime minister] whose actions have cost tens of thousands of needless deaths without so much as an expression of regret”.

The reopening of schools was carried out with the complicity of the education unions, leading them to become the key vector of the virus and its spiralling out of control, with more deaths caused in the period September to December 2020 than throughout the beginning of the pandemic.

Schools were only closed earlier this year due to mounting opposition among educators and parents at rising death rates, including by then of at least 570 education workers, forcing the National Education Union (NEU) to ask its members to refuse to return to work in January by citing Section 44 of the workplace Health and Safety Act.

The NEU and other education unions refused to organise strike action or walkouts. But when the government tried to reopen primary schools on January 4, teachers stayed away forcing the Tories to announce the third national lockdown the same day.

This was the background to Corbyn’s second tweet on the issue of schools, on January 7, submitted to the thread by one of his loyal supporters.

The second tweet was yet another attempt to boost the unions, pointing to an advert calling for mitigations in schools in the *Daily Mirror* that had been rejected by the right-wing *Daily Mail*, according to NEU joint general secretary Kevin Courtney.

The advert was based on an NEU campaign offering to work with Johnson to make reopening schools possible. On January 28, the NEU released its Education Recovery Plan January 2021, predicated on a school reopening during the pandemic that the government had scheduled for March 8. The NEU participated in driving its members back into schools in a “staggered” reopening.

That is it, as far as Corbyn and school reopenings is concerned, leaving his supporters thrashing around to make the excuses for his behaviour:

1. That he is at least “better” than his supposed opponents,

including the extraordinary claim that he was too busy to have noticed the impact of COVID on schools—“To be honest I think he has so much on his plate he has overlooked it, so much to do, unlike Starmer who takes time out, give JC a shout/reminder”.

2. That he is the subject of all pervasive censorship so that, “What’s the betting that he has been speaking out but it’s not been reported?” And “He’s pretty much gagged so who knows.”

Such feeble excuses belong to the “Poor Jeremy” school of political apologetics, portraying him as a victim of forces that were too powerful to combat.

This is untrue and politically disorienting. It reinforces the claims of a despised Tory government and the ruling elite it serves that there is no alternative to their rule, under conditions where the working class, that most powerful of social forces, can and must be mobilised against them.

If Corbyn wanted to make his views known and even, God forbid, fight for them, he was and still is, though admittedly to a much lesser extent thanks to being widely discredited by his past betrayals, in a favourable position to do so.

As a former leader of the Labour Party, popularly elected by hundreds of thousands, Corbyn’s twitter account still has 2.4 million followers. Had he wanted to oppose the reopening of schools, many of these followers would not only have read his statements, but also retweeted them and acted in support. Corbyn has more twitter followers than the Labour Party and Starmer combined, involving more potential readers than the combined daily circulation of Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun*, and the nominally liberal *Guardian*.

No one is censoring Corbyn except Corbyn himself. And the reason he does so is rooted in his own rotten politics. His few public utterances on schools, and on the pandemic generally, confirm that Corbyn’s loyalty, first, last and always, is to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. His entire period as Labour leader consisted of a concerted effort to oppose popular demands to drive the Blairite right-wing out of the party and thwart the aspiration of party members for a socialist turn.

Corbyn’s sole abiding “principle” was to preserve the unity of the Labour Party at all costs, allowing the right-wing to wage trench warfare against Labour’s members as Corbyn retreated on every major issue, including Trident nuclear weapons, NATO membership and council cuts.

“Nice” Mr Corbyn not only presided over some of his closest allies being witch-hunted out of the party as “anti-Semites”, but even boasted of speeding up the process of their exclusion. In doing so he created the conditions for his own defeat in the 2019 general election, the election of Boris Johnson, and his own removal from the parliamentary Labour Party within weeks of meekly handing leadership over to Starmer.

Corbyn’s record on the pandemic is in line with his opposition not only to any action by the working class against the Blairites, but also against the Tories.

In the March 25, 2020, parliamentary debate on the pandemic, his last as party leader, Corbyn said of Labour’s approach, “Our immediate task as the Opposition is to help arrest the spread of the coronavirus, support the government’s public health efforts while being constructively critical where we feel it is necessary to

improve the official response.”

Support for the Johnson government combined with “constructive criticism” became the official policy of Starmer, but it was handed to him fully formed by Corbyn.

Its bitter fruit was revealed by Corbyn himself in an August 2020 Tribune podcast, “A World to Win”. Describing events at some unspecified point in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, but clearly prior to his removal as party leader on April 4, Corbyn admitted, “We were involved in meetings with the government throughout the spring of this year and Jon Ashworth and I remember distinctly going to a meeting at the Cabinet Office, where we got a lecture about herd immunity.”

He commented, “It was absurd that actually [you] would build up herd immunity by allowing people to die. And so, while the government was going into eugenic formulas and discussing all this stuff, they were not making adequate preparations.”

Corbyn told no one that the Tories were explicitly following a murderous herd immunity policy he described as “eugenic”, one which the WSWs described as a “fascistic policy for the deliberate elimination of a supposedly undesirable section of the population for the supposed betterment of the species, in this case a vast swathe of the working class, especially the elderly, infirm, and otherwise vulnerable.”

When this “herd immunity” policy was publicly proclaimed by Johnson and his chief scientific advisor, Sir Patrick Vallance, at a press conference on March 12, it evoked widespread popular anger that eventually forced the government to impose the first public lockdown on March 23.

That delay cost tens of thousands of lives. Corbyn shares responsibility for them all.

Though he now sits on the backbenches, as an independent, Corbyn’s continued silence on all fundamental questions is guaranteed as he begs Starmer for full readmission into the Labour Party’s rotting carcass. He and the dwindling band of “lefts” he leads are the last line of defence of a party and a trade union apparatus that faithfully serve the interests of the major banks and corporations, even if this costs the health and lives of working people and their children.



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