Conservative MP Robert Halfon’s herd immunity bill seeks to prevent school closures during pandemic

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5 November 2021

Robert Halfon MP, the Conservative chairman of the Commons Education Committee, has introduced a “triple lock” bill to prevent a future lockdown of schools.

The legislation would officially classify schools as “essential infrastructure”, keeping them open during any national emergency, including a public health crisis. Any lockdown of schools, especially relating to the pandemic, would require ministers to first consult the Children’s Commissioner, then debate and vote on the matter in parliament, then to renew the decision in parliament every three weeks.

The bill passed its first reading unopposed on November 3 and has received the open support of a dozen MPs, including senior Tory right-winger Sir Iain Duncan Smith and former children’s ministers Tim Loughton and Edward Timpson.

Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi has not backed the legislation, promising to look at it, but insisted, “Protecting face-to-face learning is my absolute priority. I have no plans whatsoever to close schools again.”

Halfon’s Schools and Education Settings (Essential Infrastructure and Opening During Emergencies) Bill ought to be named the Herd Immunity Bill, or the Mass Infection of Children Bill. Its purpose is to aid Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s and any future government in refusing to implement school closures, a vital public health measure for combatting a highly infectious and deadly disease.

Defending the proposal, Halfon claimed, “Whilst national lockdowns were important to protect the health of the public, school closures have been nothing short of a disaster for our children.” The “disaster” that really concerns him is the threat to the financial interests of the super-rich posed by any serious effort to combat the pandemic.

These interests have already repeatedly forced the full reopening of schools, leading to disastrous surges of disease. Last year’s reopening led to peak infections rates of one in 40 primary school pupils and one in 27 secondary school pupils. The spread of infection through schools fuelled the UK’s deadliest wave of the pandemic last winter.

Case rates this autumn are even higher, with one in 25 primary pupils and one in 11 secondary pupils infected. So far, 108 children have been killed by the virus, over 7,000 hospitalised and nearly 70,000 left suffering with Long COVID, with 10,000 of those for more than a year.

Infections are again beginning to spread into older layers of the population. More than 12,000 children in the UK had already lost a parent or caregiver to the virus by April this year. Thousands more will have parents debilitated by Long COVID.

Halfon’s bill seeks to make this wilful infection of children and their families a permanent situation, and to allow the same to take place in any future epidemic or pandemic. The ruling class, dependent on the constant exploitation of the working class to sustain its profits, is determined to never again allow a shutdown of sections of the economy. To keep parents at work, children must be kept in schools and exposed to the virus.

The task of moving this legislation through parliament has been handed to the Tories’ point man for advancing reactionary measures under the cover of concern for young people and the working class. A leading member of the Blue Collar Conservatism caucus, Halfon has been a voice of opposition to the closure of schools, supposedly out of concern for disadvantaged children.

His article for the *Daily Telegraph* last June, “By not reopening schools we risk damaging the life chances of thousands of children”, gives a flavour. Schools needed to reopen “sooner rather than later,” he wrote, because children faced “an epidemic of educational poverty, a growing digital divide and a safeguarding crisis.”

Halfon is supported by the former and current Children’s Commissioners, whose job it will be under his proposed legislation to tell ministers whether school closures are “appropriate”.

Current Commissioner for England Dame Rachel De

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Souza commented, “There is no doubt that children paid a high price for their time away from school, and now is the moment to put children at the heart of the recovery from the pandemic. That is why it is absolutely right for us to do all we can to keep schools open for children.”

The right-wing motivations for Halfon’s bill are highlighted by his close connection with the campaigning organisation UsForThem, a lobbying group for school reopening and against masks and vaccines for children.

Tweeting about “Presenting my new Bill to Parliament”, Halfon noted it had been backed by “the inspirational @UsforThemUK”.

In an article written for *Conservative Home* this July, he gushed, “If there were an Oscar for campaigning I would, without hesitation, give it to the pressure group Us for Them. Set up in the height of the pandemic, by a group of families worried about school closures and the damage to children, these parents—with minimal funding—have fought night and day on behalf of pupils.”

An Oscar would perhaps be appropriate. UsForThem is about as far from a grassroots pressure group speaking on behalf of parents and children as it is possible to be.

The organisation was set up in May 2020 to defend the interests of big business by calling for an end to all public health measures relating to schools and has been happy to work with anti-vax groups to achieve this end. Its connections have been revealed in a series of significant exposures by the *Byline Times* .

Byline note an article published by *The Times* newspaper this February which reads, “MPs in the COVID Recovery Group [of anti-lockdown campaigners on the Tory right], organised by Steve Baker, a perennial backbench Machiavelli, have joined forces with the UsforThem campaign, which has been pressing for schools to re-open, to form an umbrella organisation called The Recovery Alliance. Ed Barker, a political consultant, is bringing them together with business figures who want the focus to shift from health to the economy.”

Barker manages communications for both UsForThem and the COVID Recovery Group, as well as for Halfon’s Blue Collar Conservatism group.

In June last year, *Byline* reports, UsForThem sent a letter to the Department for Education warning of legal action against school closures and social distancing and other protection measures in schools. A legal pre-action was provided by the multi-billion-dollar law firm DLA Piper. According to the *Telegraph*, a similar letter was sent earlier this year demanding the end of face masks in schools.

UsForThem’s original letter cited the work of Ellen Townsend as evidence for “the harm social distancing causes to children”. She is a signatory to the Great Barrington Declaration and a spokesperson for the anti-lockdown, vaccine and mask Health Advisory and Recovery Team (HART), also connected with the Tory party. Another leading member of USForThem, Rosamond Jones, works closely with HART.

Halfon’s bill translates this filthy right-wing campaign into parliamentary language and, he hopes, into law.

Designating schools as “essential infrastructure” would also prepare for the banning of strikes among school workers should the ruling class succeed with their long-wished-for plans to outlaw industrial action in “essential” sectors, as is already the case in several other European countries.

The bill’s second reading is scheduled for February 4, 2022. Labour have so far issued no response.

Association of School and College Leaders General Secretary Geoff Barton commented, “We support the idea of defining schools and other education settings as ‘essential infrastructure’ and doing everything possible to keep them open during times of national emergency,” only adding the caveats that it would “have to take into account public health advice” and “be backed up with material support”.

Nick Brook, deputy general secretary of school leaders’ union NAHT, said the bill “misses the point. Rather than thinking about political mechanisms to prevent school closures, we need the government to do far more to help keep classes open.”

As throughout the pandemic, the trade unions will work hand-in-glove with Johnson to carry out the preferred policy of the corporations. For all their lying claims, neither they nor the Tories care a jot about the fate of the vast majority of children. Fighting the pandemic and making up the damage done to young people in the last year, above all by the government’s allowing the unrestrained spread of the virus, demands an independent political movement of the working class for socialism.

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