

Lisa Diaz, Sarah Saul condemn right-wing campaign to keep schools open amid surging pandemic

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All) campaigner Lisa Diaz yesterday about the ongoing threats against her family by the Johnson government and Labour-controlled Wigan Council. Diaz is being targeted for keeping her children out of school and fighting for COVID safety measures.

Lisa has yet to receive any further communication from Woodfield Primary or Wigan Council since they threatened her with fines, criminal prosecution and action through the Family Court, but she explained, “their arguments are crumbling continuously”.

Lisa said, “Ofsted [the schools inspector] have been told not to do any more inspections in schools as of yesterday because it’s too dangerous. If you ever needed an example of one rule for them and another for us. How is it okay that the workers, the teachers, the canteen staff, the cleaners, everybody who works in the school go in, but government inspectors stay at home?”

“How are they going to take me to court when Boris Johnson says, ‘I’m following the science, everybody work from home who can, except children, you go in to catch the virus.’ It doesn’t make any sense whatsoever unless the plan is to mass infect children.”

Referring to a recent South African study of 211,000 positive COVID-19 test results, early data from which suggests children are 20 percent more likely to be hospitalised by Omicron than by Delta, Lisa said, “It pushes the need even more for us to eliminate the virus. You get a vaccine and you think, ‘okay, this works, to this extent,’ but then the virus will keep adapting and you can’t just keep chasing after it with vaccines.”

Lisa condemned press headlines opposing school closures and lockdowns on the grounds of protecting children from domestic abuse as “sick” and “blatant manipulation and propaganda.”

“What have they done to campaign against cuts to social services, what have they done about children’s mental health and the cuts to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services]? Everything is stripped to the bone.

“And their interests are nothing to do with children being

abused at home. Their interests are to do with business and perpetuating the lie that everything can continue as normal. It’s all about protecting the corporate elite, it’s nothing to do with what’s in the best interests of children.”

This point was supported by fellow SafeEdForAll member, and co-founder of the group, Sarah Saul, who said, “those people who are using the plight of vulnerable, abused, neglected children, weaponising them, basically, in their arguments for keeping schools open, without equally asking for schools to be made safe, are very disingenuous.

“It’s 33 years since I got out of my abusive childhood situation, so I totally understand the importance of school to children, school was my respite, the place where I was safe.

“If you then send me into a school where I am likely to be infected, you’re taking away my respite and my safe space. And that’s why I get so angry at people who obviously have no knowledge of what is happening with abused, vulnerable and neglected children, and yet they’re happy to use them as part of their argument.”

Lisa continued, “If children are under threat at home, the solution isn’t to throw them into a COVID petri dish and put them in another dangerous situation. The solution is to make schools safe by driving down infection rates to eliminate the virus, like they have done successfully in other countries, and then open them up again with tight mitigations.”

Lisa and Sarah both referred to a filthy propaganda piece in last weekend’s *Sunday Express* whose banner headline screamed, “Tragic legacy for children: School closures cost pupils lives.” Its subheading read, “Lockdown abuse may have killed 223 children.” The article channelled the media feeding frenzy over the terrible murder of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes.

The newspaper’s health editor Lucy Johnston misrepresented and distorted every fact. Yet her own article acknowledged that 191 of the serious incidents recorded by social services related to babies under one year old, who were not affected by COVID-related school closures. As for the over 200 killed by “lockdown abuse”, the total figure of 223 is an increase of 35 on the non-lockdown year 2019/20.

The piece is a prime example of the whipping up of emotive

issues around children to push a reactionary agenda which has nothing to do with their wellbeing. Johnston is not writing out of concern for the impact of lockdowns on children. She is spreading lies to keep parents in work by keeping children in school and exposed to COVID-19.

The *Express*'s gutter journalism is only the most shameless expression of a campaign which extends from Tory-right front organisations like the ubiquitously cited "parents' group" UsForThem to the wider Tory party, the Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

Downing Street insisted on Monday, "There are certainly no plans to put in any restriction on schooling." Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesperson added that this would only be done in the case of an "absolute public health emergency," without trying to explain how the current situation isn't exactly that.

After Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi and Health Secretary Sajid Javid were forced to acknowledge that they could not "guarantee" absolutely all schools would remain open this winter, the Liberal Democrats' education spokesperson Munira Wilson leapt into the breach. She responded, "This failure to provide a cast-iron guarantee just about says it all about this government and their priorities. Time and time again, our children have been badly let down by the government's inability to get on top of COVID."

The idea that failing to keep schools open this winter, in conditions of an out-of-control pandemic, is to "let down" children is a gross perversion of reality. Keeping schools, and all of society, functioning regularly and safely means adopting an elimination strategy. Reaching that stage from such a high level of virus circulation urgently requires stringent measures, including the temporary closures of schools. But this is what Wilson is really trying to prevent.

Labour pursues the same policy. Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson sent an open letter to Zahawi last Friday perpetuating the lie that the worst danger to children in the pandemic is lost school time. She wrote, "Our children have borne the brunt of the pandemic with school closures and repeated isolations seeing opportunities lost, learning falling behind and mental health conditions rising."

One would hardly know that over 12,000 children have been hospitalised with COVID in the UK, over 100 killed, and over 77,000 inflicted with Long COVID, 14,000 for more than a year, or that countless more have lost family members, including primary care givers. All of which says nothing of the wider impact of the virus to which its circulation among children contributes.

Phillipson's response is to call for the government to "take urgent action to drive up vaccination rates among 12–15-year-olds and deliver proper ventilation in schools." This is advice offered to the Johnson government about how best to package its strategy, agreed with by Labour, of keeping schools and the economy open while the new variant runs rampant, currently at

over 200,000 infections a day.

Stephen Morgan, shadow schools minister, underscored Labour's support for the government yesterday, calling on ministers to "deliver a Christmas vaccine guarantee to ensure all 12- to 15-year-olds can get a jab during the holidays to keep kids learning next term." He added, "This must be delivered alongside practical ventilation measures in all schools, so teachers are not forced to open windows this winter."

In Scotland, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon promised last week to "bust a gut" to keep schools open. Her deputy, John Swinney, repeated that schools would be "the last thing we close", refusing calls for an early end to term before Christmas, again citing "interruption to ... education."

Huge numbers of children, educators, their families and communities are suffering the consequences of this right-wing agenda. Omicron cases are being reported at school after school, leading to an increasing number of full or partial closures.

According to Department for Education figures released yesterday, the number of children absent due to COVID on December 9 increased 13.5 percent over two weeks to 236,000. Other data, released by Ofsted, showed a record number of early years and childhood settings were dealing with a known COVID infection at the end of last month—2,707, compared to a previous high of 2,400 in February. The NASWUT teaching union reported that, in some schools, up to half the teaching workforce are off for COVID-related reasons.

The scale of the crisis has forced the education unions to make some calls for minimal action to save face, including face masks in secondary school classrooms, staggered breaktimes, and improved ventilation, vaccination for school workers, contact tracing and isolation. In the face of the current situation admitted by Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) leader Geoff Barton—"high numbers of students absent from classrooms are being compounded by significant numbers of teachers who are also at home ill"—these measures, in any case dependent on the good will of the Johnson government, are entirely inadequate.

Schools must be closed, with all necessary support provided to children and families, as part of a broader strategy to eliminate the virus, allowing them to be reopened safely with the required protections in place to prevent future outbreaks. This programme is fought for by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) .



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