UK reaches “hundreds of thousands” of daily COVID cases as education unions demand schools reopen in January

Margot Miller
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The Johnson government is refusing to implement any serious measures as COVID-19 spreads like wild-fire, exacerbated by the more transmissible variant Omicron.

Case numbers in Britain have officially reached 90,000 plus a day, but the government’s scientific advisers say the real figure is already “hundreds of thousands” every day.

Omicron is set to become dominant across Britain, having already achieved dominance in Scotland, London, Manchester and other cities. It became dominant in Ireland Sunday.

On Saturday, London Mayor Sadiq Khan announced a “major incident” in the capital, which saw its largest number of cases since the pandemic began. There are currently around 15,000 people in hospital beds with COVID in the capital, an increase of 30 percent in seven days.

According to the scenarios drawn up by government advisers, continuing with the government’s Plan B of limited COVID measures alone gives a range of 600,000 to 2 million infections per day from “late December 2021 to January 2022”. There would be between 3,000-10,000 hospitalisations daily from “January to February 2022” and 600-6,000 deaths per day from, “Mid-January to mid-March 2022.”

The ruling Conservatives, backed by the Labour Party, have insisted since the economy was fully reopened in July that there would be no more lockdowns—the proven method of reducing the catastrophic rate of illness and deaths during the pandemic, as demonstrated in China.

The only measure taken is to press ahead with the vaccine roll-out, including booster jabs to all adults, which though necessary will not halt the rise in infections. Scientists estimate a significant drop in the efficacy of existing vaccines even with the booster. Also, a large percentage of the population remains unvaccinated. The government has so far resisted vaccinating 5-12-year-olds, despite the fact that alarming data from South Africa indicates that it is children who are the second most susceptible age group to succumb to Omicron. Five percent of infected children were hospitalised in South Africa.

The government refused to close schools before the Christmas break, even though many schools were forced to partially close as COVID took its toll among staff and pupils. On Friday, the last day of term for most schools, the UK registered a record 92,597 cases. Saturday saw another record high of 90,418 cases, while total weekly cases increased by 45 percent.

The Tories are now resisting growing demands from parents and educators to keep schools shut after the holidays, even though the National Health Service (NHS) could be soon overwhelmed.

In the face of this escalating catastrophe, the education unions have also made reopening schools in the new term in January their top priority.

The Department for Education reported 13,000 staff COVID-related absences from schools on December 9, or 2.4 percent of the workforce. In anticipation of massive staff shortages due to COVID, Education Secretary Nadim Zahawi wrote to schools requesting they contact retired educators to make up the dwindling workforce.

Rather than condemning sending the most susceptible age group into one of the main vectors of infection, the education unions welcomed this insane proposal. Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, supported “anything which may help” tackle staff shortages.

Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), used the government’s appeal to reiterate the unions’ false claims that schools can be made safe with a few mitigation measures, and insisted face-to-face teaching must continue.

“Of course we support measures that could help to reduce education disruption,” he said. “It is important to say that this disruption is likely to be made worse because of the government's failure to put in place the mitigations and

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safety measures we have been calling for—on ventilation, air filtration, mask wearing and isolation of very close contacts."

"We still need those mitigations to be put in place—even to help with the effort of recruitment of temporary retired staff.'

The NEU and other unions have allowed their members to work in, by their own admission, a dangerous environment for two years even as the government refused to put in place any of their demands. Official COVID statistics, not updated since October 21, show that 570 education staff have died due to COVID and 114,000 teachers have Long COVID. Twitter support group Long Covid Kids estimate 69,000 children have Long COVID, equivalent to three per school.

On December 8, unable to ignore increasing case numbers any longer, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his Plan B, proposing a few toothless mitigation measures such as compulsory face masks in indoor settings except hospitality venues; vaccination passes showing double vaccination or negative lateral flow tests; and working from home where possible.

Anticipating opposition among teachers and educators to the surge of cases in schools, the NEU rushed to the government's defence with its own Plan B for schools and colleges. Courtney said, "We are disappointed that in his announcement the prime minister has made no mention of schools, given that cases are rising so fast and this is leading to so much disruption of education. More than 200,000 pupils were absent for Covid-related reasons on 25 November and since then infection rates among school-age children have risen further."

This reprises the union's role during the spring lockdown, when it produced its Education Recovery Plan to facilitate the reopening of schools in March, paving the way for further waves.

The union's Plan B accepts some level of viral spread, which translates into more deaths and Long COVID cases, stating in a press release the government "must urgently increase the level of mitigations to slow the spread of Covid-19 in our schools."

Its demands include the wearing of face coverings to be extended to classrooms by staff and students, but not in primary schools. On top of "Government guidance of 10-day isolation on close contacts of confirmed or suspected Omicron cases," the union proposed a negative PCR test before returning to school.

Other demands include ventilation measures, staggered break times and "provision of higher-grade medical masks (FFP2, FFP3) provided where requested [!]" for "at-risk staff and pupils previously defined as clinically vulnerable, or clinically extremely vulnerable, or involved in close contact and personal care."

The NEU therefore accepts that clinically vulnerable (CV) and extremely vulnerable staff and pupils (CEV), or those living with vulnerable family members, must remain in school.

No amount of mitigation measures the union proposes and the government routinely ignores can make crowded classrooms and corridors safe with an airborne virus. The NEU even turns a blind eye to the Ofsted school inspectorate body cancelling all inspections until further notice due to the out-of-control situation in schools.

The government has responded to COVID-related absences by stepping up its intimidation of parents, threatening parents Lisa Diaz, Sarah Paxman and others with huge fines and the prosecution in family courts. Education Minister Nadim Zahawi recently wrote to local council chief executives telling them to inform parents that school absence "has repercussions," including fixed penalty notices, parenting contracts and education supervision orders.

Throughout the pandemic the NEU (membership 450,000) and NASUWT (300,000) have worked to suppress the growing opposition to the government's policies of social murder. Their collaboration with the government to enforce a return to classrooms is only the most advanced expression of the role played by all the unions and the Labour Party during the pandemic.

Educators and parents must build their own rank and file committees independent of the unions to fight for a strategy to eliminate the virus, involving the temporary closure of schools and non-essential industries. Contact the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee today and participate in the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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