

No return to schools! Children's lives matter!

Statement of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK)
3 January 2022

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) calls on all school workers, parents and students to mobilise in opposition to the policy of reopening schools and campuses under conditions of a lethal escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools must shut in favour of online learning, as part of an urgent programme of lockdowns and other public health measures to eliminate the virus.

The only force capable of implementing this policy, against a conspiracy of the Conservative government, the Labour Party and the trade unions, is a unified movement of the working class. Independent rank-and-file committees must be formed to organise mass walkouts at unsafe workplaces and impose the necessary restrictions while the virus is brought under control.

Omicron is spreading at breathtaking speed. In just the past week, the UK has officially recorded well over one million cases. The reality is far worse, with the testing system overwhelmed by an avalanche of infections. Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, a government adviser, warned on New Year's Day that the UK is likely closer to 500,000 cases a day. Expert modelling predicts that COVID infections in England could reach 1.4 million a day and deaths 3,000 a day within weeks if no additional measures are taken, with 15,000 daily hospitalisations.

With all primary-aged and two million secondary-aged children unvaccinated, most secondary children only single-dosed and educators with waning immunity, the return to school is a recipe for mass illness and death.

Schools that have acted as primary vectors for viral transmission will again be made a mechanism for imposing the government's "herd immunity" agenda, with catastrophic consequences for children, educators, their families and the wider community.

The relentless propaganda that "children don't get sick" stands exposed as a cynical lie told to keep children in school so that their parents can continue to work and make profit for the major corporations and the super-rich.

Another 92 children aged between 0 and 5 were admitted to hospital with COVID in England on

December 28, as well as 53 aged between 6 and 17, a total of 145 children in one day. Children made up 10 percent of all 1,455 people admitted to hospital with COVID that day, in a week that saw 621 children admitted in the biggest weekly rise since the pandemic began. Support group Long COVID Kids estimates 69,000 children have Long COVID, equivalent to three per school. Over 124 children have already been killed by COVID-19 in the UK.

These tragic statistics will be dwarfed as the government enforces its back-to-school policy. On January 1, Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi declared in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Now there can be no excuse for our children not learning face to face in the classroom where they want and need to be," adding, "we are transitioning from pandemic to endemic in this country."

A day later, Zahawi sent an open letter to education and childcare leaders outlining a few pathetic mitigations to justify a return to unsafe classrooms, relaxing Ofsted inspections, "making available up to 7,000 new air cleaning units", recommending all secondary school students "undertake one on-site test on return", and be "encouraged to test twice a week" and told to wear face coverings in classrooms until January 26.

The fraudulent character of such measures was underscored by Zahawi's instruction that schools look at "merging classes, teaching in bigger numbers" to deal with staff absences.

The scale of Omicron transmission is underscored by the government preparing for public sector absences rising to 25 percent of the workforce, meaning that many schools will be running combined classes of 60-70 children if they try to stay open. Zahawi is also asking schools to contact retired, and more vulnerable, educators to make up staff shortages. This gives the lie to all claims that face-to-face learning is motivated by any concern for education. Schools are being transformed into holding pens and high pressure COVID incubators.

The government's partners in crime are the trade unions and the Labour Party, who now openly advance

themselves as guarantors and enforcers of its homicidal pandemic policy.

A day before Zahawi's open letter was published, the six main education unions (NASUWT, ASCL, GMB, NAHT, NEU and UNISON) issued a joint statement to endorse the reopening. It proclaims, "teachers, leaders and support staff desperately want to be able to conduct face-to-face teaching".

The only demands laid down by the education unions were for deferring Ofsted inspections, providing support "for the costs of supply staff to cover for Covid-related absence", "on-site testing", additional "air cleaning units" and reviewing mask policies.

The statement concluded with an appeal for the "government to work more collaboratively and constructively with education workforce representatives to keep schools and colleges open." This collaboration is already underway, with every single measure suggested by the unions incorporated into Zahawi's reopening propaganda offensive.

The unions' contempt for their members health and lives could not be clearer. A section of their statement acknowledges, "last term education staff were more likely than other workers to test positive", only to complain that this was "inevitably leading to disruption of education." What infections also "led to" were the deaths of 570 education staff and the incapacitation of 114,000 teachers by Long COVID, according to statistics not updated since October 2021!

Last January, a mass rank-and-file rebellion by teachers prevented a planned return to schools, forcing the education unions to make a pose of support for any individual teacher citing Section 44 of the Employment Act and their right to refuse to work in an unsafe workplace. This time, faced with a COVID outbreak three times as large, the unions have pledged themselves to police a return to classrooms no matter what the cost.

For Labour, Shadow Education Wes Streeting has meekly called on the government to "make sure pupils are able to test twice a week", yet another official policy of the government.

Opposition to mass infection can find no expression through these rotten organisations.

Since the reopening of schools last March, thanks to the unions and the Labour Party, the only organised resistance in the UK has been the Friday school strikes called by parent Lisa Diaz and campaign group SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All) from October 1. These actions were organised independently of the trade unions and capitalist

political parties and evoked a strong response among parents and workers worldwide.

Taking forward a broader fight against unsafe schools requires the development of this independent, internationalist movement in the entire working class, based on its own policy of saving lives rather than profits.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) established in May, 2020, together with their sister organisations worldwide, have fought throughout the pandemic to provide a programme for this movement.

In an August 8, 2020, statement, we called for "the development of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees to prepare for a general strike against the opening of schools and the murderous policy of the ruling class." We insist that the only viable strategy is for the eradication of the virus, based on the policies advanced by the foremost epidemiologists, virologists and other scientists throughout the pandemic, a policy of Zero Covid.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges parents, educators and students throughout Britain to oppose the return to schools as part of an international offensive of the working class.

The necessary measures to contain the pandemic—universal testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, masking and vaccinations—must be implemented alongside a shutdown of non-essential workplaces to cut off the chain of viral transmission. Such measures, implemented on a world scale, would see the pandemic contained and eradicated in a matter of months.

To take up this life and death struggle, join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) today and discuss setting up a committee in your school.



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