

“What’s the point in being in a union when they don't look after their members?”

Educators and parents denounce UK education unions over unsafe schools

Tony Robson, Robert Stevens
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Opposition to the education unions from teachers, parents and other workers is mounting. On social media they have registered disgust at the unions’ preventing a fight against the spread of COVID in schools. Many are calling for strike action and for schools to close until further safety measures are implemented.

Last January, the threat by tens of thousands of workers to utilise Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act to assert their right not to work in unsafe conditions forced the Johnson government into closing schools and imposing a lockdown.

The National Education Union (NEU) marked the anniversary, January 3, in a cynical 450-word Facebook statement, “A day to be proud of.”

The NEU has worked to keep schools open throughout the pandemic. It now makes the lying claim that it organised the mobilisation of teachers and shutdown of schools last January, at the height of the pandemic.

It was only when it was clear that the opposition growing among educators and parents to horrifying COVID-19 death rates, which had taken the lives of at least 570 education workers, that the NEU said it would support any members who cited Section 44. It and other education unions did so only to legitimise their refusal to organise the strike action or walkouts being called for.

When the Conservative government tried to reopen primary schools on January 4, teachers stayed away, forcing the Tories, concerned that the action of educators could spearhead a broader movement of opposition, to announce the third national lockdown that day.

A year on, the NEU’s statement does not even mention rising deaths or hospitalisation among children, claiming that the situation is “very different” now with the vaccine rollout while complaining that the government is not doing enough to prevent further “disruption” to education.

The union is in effect herding hundreds of thousands of its members into COVID infested schools with the only proviso that they “report the CO2 monitor readings from their classrooms.”

All the NEU proposed in its anniversary statement was that an online Zoom meeting be held Thursday evening, which it stipulated would only be open to union reps. This is because last January 3, the NEU held an open meeting that was attended by 400,000 of its members, reflecting the massive rebellion of school workers with many saying they would not attend unsafe schools the next day.

The NEU learned its lesson.

The main items on the closed meeting’s agenda were “updates from Kevin Courtney and Dr Mary Bousted, joint general secretaries of the NEU, on Covid-19 and the NEU’s ‘Value Education, Value Educators’ campaign on tackling workload and fighting for a pay rise.” An “update”

on COVID was tagged on as an afterthought.

The NEU’s attempt to bask in the reflected glory of the January lockdown has provoked widespread anger. One NEU member said in response, “That was a day to be proud of... But now I am not proud. Now we are not doing anything to fight and keep our pupils and communities safe... We should be refusing to go back until each class has a HEPA filter, masks on for everyone all the time. Not enough staff to open? Then nature is telling us we need to lockdown.”

A fellow education worker said, “Different this year! Say that to your member whose Christmas was ruined this year because she caught covid doing her job. I’ve never been so down and I’m going back tomorrow, covid negative but still suffering long term effects... And the absence among staff we will have this week are already stacking up... What are you doing? Right now?”

Another said, “Child safety out of the window yet again !!”

“I was also proud to be a member last year but this year it feels like primary schools and early years settings have been totally abandoned,” added another.

One pointed out, “But you have said nothing about ‘merged’ classes. One staff member to up to 70 kids. That’s a precedent not be set. Here is one teacher who won’t be doing that!”

Another commented, “but what are you doing this year—absolutely bloody nothing.”

Someone wrote, “Thursday [the day of the Zoom meeting] is too late. You need to recommend Section 44 letters again now. Maybe less people are dying due to vaccinations but people are dying and it’s the biggest rise of deaths in children. Masks are not enough, filters in 2 months time are not enough. Schools need to be safe now before millions more children and teachers are infected where at least 1/10 of them will suffer Long Covid.

“Squeezing lots of classes into the hall when several teachers catch covid at once is not educating. It’s babysitting... it’s much safer they be allowed to work independently at home. Remote learning for some will slow down the spread so teachers and children are not at such a high risk of getting infected especially as there is another new variant in the Country from Cameroon.”

Responding to the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) who were promoting the joint statement of the six education unions backing the returns to schools, a service engineer supervisor responded, “I wonder if these unions will ever do anything at all or even bother protecting their members at any point at all.”

A NASUWT member said, “Demanding stuff hasn’t worked in the past. Why don’t our unions take action to protect us?”

Nikki Keech posted, “I am extremely vulnerable immune suppressed teacher—expected in school on Tuesday. School refuse to let me work from home - no response from them or this union so have no clue what to do. Bloody terrified and extremely angry. Try taking some real action to support teachers - no wonder we are leaving the profession in droves!”

Mellieha Colmer responded, “I’m in the same boat as you. I actually feel... whats the point in being in a union when they don’t look after their members... it’s all empty promises”.

A posting from “Solihull NASUWT” read, “the unions should be suggesting joint action.”

On January 2, the NEU posted on social media, “The Govt must act to reduce Covid disruption in our schools: buy air filters for every classroom, improve ventilation, make masks in classrooms a requirement and defer Ofsted inspections.”

The posting effectively sanctioned children and staff being sent back into classrooms, now based on a promise of more ventilators at some unspecified future point. It was backed enthusiastically by former “left” Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who stated, “I fully support the NEU union call for urgent action to reduce Covid disruption, including through funding for improving ventilation.”

Corbyn backed the NEU’s statement, just weeks after voting in Parliament against compulsory vaccines for NHS staff, and a requirement for proof of vaccination or a negative test before entering pubs, clubs and restaurants—supporting the extreme right of the Tory party in claiming that this was an unpardonable infringement on individual liberties.

Corbyn’s endorsement of the NEU was in stark contrast to the hostile response of rank-and-file educators who denounced the union’s apologia for the Johnson government’s homicidal efforts to keep schools open.

Susan wrote on Twitter, “I think you need to coordinate with other unions and call a national strike now this government will not act to protect people’s lives they have to be forced to.”

Emma commented, “Why have you left it until now? Also you know they won’t do this, they’ve had 2 years! same as they won’t pay proper sick pay, end poverty, stop privatising our NHS... when will the unions stand up for us, our kids, workers... ? it’s #ClassWar and they are killing us.”

Another posted, “Too little too late. Omicron will rip through schools”

One comment read, “Is this it ?!! Where are you for those members going into classes where on current stats there will be 2 or more positive kids”.

Karen F said, “Horrorified teachers, children and families in primary schools are being told to just gamble with their health. Words aren’t enough, action is required.”

Phil Bretherton responded, “Weak union hence why I am not paying subscription this year. You don’t support teachers.”

Dr. Simon J Stewart, a lecturer at Staffordshire University, wrote, “Teachers want @NEU union to support them and all children. You’re running around the thread ducking and dodging this. 125 children are dead so far, and 77,000+ kids are suffering long covid...”

On Facebook, Daisy Jeanne said of the NEU’s pathetic demands on the government, “[I]t hasn’t worked, because all they do is post on Facebook or write letters. It’s no good just saying we think the government should do something urgently, I’m not sure why I have paid union fees at all this past year.”

Ben Williams wrote, “The government do the bare minimum and the union pats them on the back. Is this what we have become? We’re beginning to sound like [Labour leader Sir] Keir Starmer.”

Hayley Wilson asked, “What about primary schools, why are we constantly forgotten about. Ventilation is a serious issue in our classrooms, staff catching it, pupils catching it. No bubbles no safety measures in place anymore... we need our unions help... where are you?? ... Stop posting links and letters and actually do something to protect your

members.”

Kate Anne Jones wrote, “What is the union doing to protect primary school staff?” Dal Deschain replied, “sweet fa”

Christina Cowan commented, “You should not be proud now because from what I can see you are doing nothing. Schools are dangerous and our children are being out in danger and no-one seems to care. The schools need to be closed except for vulnerable children or children of essential workers (and I mean essential!). These ridiculously high numbers need to be brought down now before thousands more potentially lose their lives unnecessarily.”

Another NEU member responded, “[I]’m so bloody angry that we are constantly an afterthought. Unfortunately when I questioned my union and disagreed with them I was told maybe I’m in the wrong job! Very helpful.”

Inga Vaitkeviciene wrote, “Unions should do better than that. Seems that they are pushing school staff and pupils to be put at risk.”

NEU joint leader Courtney received another angry response after retweeting an article on a scientific study noting that ventilated air is important in combating COVID. One reply read, “Every day you mince around not doing your job you leave teachers to catch it. They f***ing know about this. We all do. Now. It’s your job to tell the government you demand they be put in schools or you’ll ballot for a strike. THATS YOUR F***ING JOB! get on with it.”

Another wrote, “Why haven’t we stopped the dangerous opening of schools? Why haven’t the union insisted on the classrooms being made safe? I feel very failed by the government and the unions. They need to close them to make them safe. 127 children have died and tens of thousands have long Covid.”

Other responses to an NEU tweet of January 4 read, “Please ballot for a strike.” and “Please NEU, demand better protection for your members, industrial action if workplaces are unsafe!”

A reply to a tweet the same day from joint leader Boustead challenged, “What are you doing to protect your members in primary school? Not a word calling out the total lack of protection for the people who pay your wages and the unvaccinated children. Have you seen the increase in paediatric admissions to hospital? No challenge to [government education minister Nadhim] Zahawi at all.”

The Educators Rank-and-File-Safety Committee (UK) has called an emergency meeting, “Close All Schools To Stop the Spread of Omicron!” for Tuesday, January 11 at 7 p.m. to discuss a fightback against the rampant spread of COVID-19 throughout schools. We urge all teachers, parents and students to register for this important event here.



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