

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee holds meeting on threat of Omicron

Our reporters
12 January 2022

The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held an emergency meeting Tuesday evening, “Close All Schools To Stop the Spread of Omicron!”

Introducing the event, Socialist Equality Party Assistant National Secretary Tom Scripps began by explaining that the message from the ruling class was that society had to “learn to live with an endemic COVID-19.”

Anyone opposed to this agenda has come under vicious attack, including SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All) campaigner Lisa Diaz.

Scripps added, “More than misinformation, the main weapon in the hands of the government and its allies is the political argument that there is no alternative—that resuming normal life depends on accepting the toll of the virus.

“Fighting to protect the population from the virus means defeating this political lie and all those who support it. And that includes the trade unions and all the opposition parties”.

Tania Kent, a Socialist Equality Party member, special needs teacher and chairperson of the Educators Committee gave the main report. She explained, “We are in the midst of the greatest public health disaster for over 100 years.”

Kent referred to the 3 million children already infected, the 117,000 with Long COVID and the 127 killed by the virus; and to the 570 educators officially reported killed by COVID-19 and the tens of thousands of school staff suffering Long COVID.

Describing schools as “holding pens for children, so that their parents can continue to work and produce profit,” she said none of this would have been possible without the part “the trade unions, and especially the education unions, have played as partners to the crimes committed by this government.”

Kent raised the joint statement issued by the education unions endorsing the return to classrooms this January and noted how union members “took to social media to denounce their complicity with the government’s criminal agenda.”

Calling for schools to be shut as part of “an urgent programme of lockdowns and other public health measures to eliminate the virus,” she concluded, “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.”

The meeting heard reports from international speakers. Speaking from Chicago in the US was Kristina Betinis, an SEP member and educator. Betinis spoke about the ongoing struggle of teachers in Chicago who are in the forefront of a fight to close schools as COVID-19 paediatric infections and hospitalisations reach record levels.

She described the struggle in Chicago as “the highest expression of the developing class battle in the United States right now... On January 6, 23,000 Chicago public school teachers refused to return to their school buildings and demanded that the city allow them to teach remotely as they did last year. The Democratic [Party] Mayor Lori Lightfoot immediately locked them out.”

The Chicago Teachers Union had “capitulated to the Mayor’s demands, sending teachers back into schools today with about 340,000 students to follow.”

Now, said Betinis, the fight was to reject this agreement, “but even more than that, the formation of rank-and-file committees—organisations that can take control, in each school, of the situation, shut the school down and get the disease transmission under control.”

Tamino, a student from Germany and member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, explained, “Here in my federal state, Baden-Württemberg, there are COVID tests for us students only in the first week. After that almost nobody will get tested anymore”.

The policy of the government “is not to close schools to stop the spread of the virus but to keep them open at all costs.”

He noted, “Just like in the UK this policy is supported by all ruling class parties, no matter if they call themselves ‘left’ or ‘right’. The Left Party-led state of Thuringia was the state with the highest incidence rate for almost the entire pandemic...”

“There is growing opposition developing among students, parents and teachers here in Germany as well. On social media a lot of people express their anger and are organizing themselves in order to fight back. Many teachers are leaving the unions. The network of independent rank-and-file committees

in Germany is receiving growing support.”

Dermot Quinn of the Socialist Equality Group in Ireland said, “In schools there has been record levels of absenteeism.” He cited official statistics showing that “even before the onset of Omicron, there was more outbreaks in schools... than in any other public setting. Omicron has come along and it has led to the situation getting worse for teachers and up to 50 percent are staying away. The unions are not doing anything about this.”

Melissa, a parent of a primary school pupil, told the meeting, “Another parent whose partner tested positive for COVID was told if they didn’t send their child into school they would be fined.”

Kent responded that this was “one of the most criminal elements of the policy of the government” and that prosecutions “have to be opposed in a public campaign, as with Lisa Diaz”. The education unions, she pointed out, “say absolutely nothing about this whatsoever.”

This point was underscored by a parent attending from France who explained there was “no protection at the schools apart from masks” and “no information about COVID from the principal or from the unions who wish to keep the school open.” Speaking of the unions, they said, “They do not care about children’s health or parents or teachers, many of whom are sick at the moment.”

Gnana, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (France) argued, “Only a globally-coordinated, scientific health strategy can defeat the highly contagious Omicron variant.”

He described, “Schools have become completely unsafe. Positive cases are exploding, with over 300,000 new infections every day in France.”

Despite this catastrophe, “the government still insists on face-to-face classes... and the Macron government is threatening that if parents refuse to send their children to school, family benefits will be suspended, and they will be prosecuted, facing fines of 15 to 30 thousand euros or even prison time. It also refuses to listen to scientists and doctors who oppose school re-openings, warning that it leads to mass infections.”

Sarah Paxman gave a moving account of her courageous fight to protect her vulnerable son from COVID-19. “I refuse to see my child ill from something that could be prevented,” she explained. Denouncing the legal threats against her as “disgusting”, Sarah said “Right about now, I feel I could prosecute them.”

Another participant argued, “Disabled people have been culled during the pandemic, with over two-thirds of people who’ve died having a disability.”

Scripps made clear that this was the deliberate agenda of a section of the ruling class which considered the pandemic “an opportunity, through the mass spread of the virus, to ‘cull dependents’,” in the words of a *Telegraph* columnist early in the pandemic. This policy had already seen catastrophic falls in life expectancy.

A National Health Service nurse then gave an account of the

terrible crisis in the hospitals, with “dozens” of trusts declaring critical incidents, “dangerous levels of bed occupancy” and ambulance crews “waiting hours and hours” to hand over seriously ill patients.

“One of my colleagues in the intensive care unit told me that often one nurse had to look after 3 critically ill patients. In our trust, nearly 250 colleagues are currently absent due to COVID-19 symptoms or isolating... We are exhausted and overworked. Not only the physical demand but also the emotional situation is intolerable. We know what is needed to fulfil the requirements of patients, but we simply can’t fulfil them.

“Despite our best efforts over the last 2 years, tragically, nearly one thousand COVID-19 patients who were under our care died. That is one in every five.

“The NHS trade unions have played the most despicable role in sacrificing their members to the death and suffering from COVID-19.”

David O’Sullivan, a member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, who was sacked last year after asserting his right to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act, described his own experience.

He said, “In London alone, 73 bus workers have been killed by COVID and all of these were preventable deaths. While the rich and powerful can shelter in their mansions and penthouses and fly to their island hideaways and country retreats, the working class has been sent into unsafe workplaces and crammed into schools and buses like cannon fodder.”

“The campaign for my reinstatement is spearheading a fightback by bus and transport workers. It is winning growing support.”

Kent closed the meeting by acknowledging the “key connections” that had been made between different countries and sectors and calling on attendees to “join this committee, participate in its work, distribute its material, write for it on your own experiences and to build its influence as broadly as possible.”

Tuesday’s meeting announced the launch of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) Twitter account, which can be followed here.



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