

No to another school year of mass infections, deaths, and education cuts!

Statement of the Educators Rank and File safety Committee (UK)

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK)
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The millions of children and teachers across the UK returning to schools this week face an unparalleled crisis within the education system.

While the COVID pandemic continues to rage, all mitigations have been removed and the risk posed to the lives and health of millions will go unchallenged.

Thousands of children will return to classes without a qualified teacher to educate them as exhausted teachers leave the profession in unprecedented numbers. The cost-of-living crisis will push thousands of schools into bankruptcy as children and their families are being thrown into deep poverty.

The privatisation and academisation agenda will be accelerated. The choice by the Conservative Party membership of arch-Thatcherite Liz Truss as prime minister will be used to shift the political agenda still further to the right as she imposes dictatorial measures to ban strikes and suppress opposition to its socially devastating measures while escalating the NATO-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, threatening billions with nuclear annihilation.

None of this is inevitable. This school year, educators must dedicate their political activity to organising a unified campaign linking their struggles with the mass upsurge of opposition across key sectors of industry through the fight for a general strike to bring down the Tory government, and the building of independent rank and file committees in every school to organise this fightback.

What is the current state of schools?

In the two-and-a-half years of the pandemic, nothing has been done to make schools safer with modern ventilation systems or to supply the well-paid and well-trained staff to meet the social, learning and mental health needs of young people. Nothing has been done to provide high-quality remote learning and social support where this is necessary.

Boris Johnson's government carried out one of the most brutal COVID policies of any government, epitomised by his infamous statement in October 2020, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!".

This policy has had a devastating impact on children and educators. Since March 2020, there have been 23.5 million COVID infections and over 203,000 deaths. At least 142 children have lost their lives as

well as 570 educators. Over 3 million children have been infected with COVID in England alone. There are over 2 million people who suffer from Long COVID, of which 98,000 are children. The teaching and education sector suffers the joint highest rate of Long COVID of any sector, at 3.79 percent.

The government, its media mouth pieces claimed as far back as *last summer* that the worst of COVID is over and we must "learn to live with the virus." July 19, 2021, was declared "Freedom Day" when almost all mitigations wound down. From April 1 this year, free testing and contact tracing was ended in schools. Children who had an asymptomatic COVID infection were told they could attend school and those who were positive with symptoms were asked to stay off school for just three days. Teachers were asked to stay off for only five days following a positive test.

Within six weeks, COVID infections increased by 43 percent to one in 50 people by mid-June, with schools as a key vector. There has since been a drop in infection and hospitalisations, but COVID continues to pose a threat to millions. In the last week alone over 25,000 infections were recorded and 419 deaths.

Scientists anticipate a fifth wave of the virus erupting following the reopening of schools. Virus modeller Professor Karl Friston predicts that an unprecedented 8 percent of the UK population will be infected by November.

Thousands of parents who have vulnerable children or are themselves vulnerable have kept their children off schools throughout the pandemic. The reopening of schools will mean further threats of fines and imprisonment, such as the case of parent Sarah Paxman who already faces legal action. There are also over 98,000 children missing in education.

On August 31, the UK's COVID alert level was downgraded from three to two, following a recommendation by the UK's four chief medical officers. The Level Two alert means that "COVID-19 is in general circulation, but direct healthcare pressures and transmission are declining or stable".

Truss, who declared that she would launch a nuclear strike on Russia, even though the result would be "global annihilation", has also pledged, "Never again will there be lockdowns in Britain." Her contender in the leadership challenge, billionaire Rishi Sunak, said it had been a mistake to "empower" scientists and that the downsides of lockdowns were suppressed. "If you empower all these independent people, you're screwed," he declared. The government has made clear it will reject any containment measures demanded by science in the face of a new surge of the virus, the growing threat of monkeypox and

the re-emergence of diseases such as polio.

The role of the education unions

Why and how have schools become the key vector for a deadly virus? Educators in the UK are the most unionised workforce in Europe, if not the world, with over 97 percent of teachers in a trade union. The largest National Education Union (NEU) is described as “left”, with several of its executive members belonging to pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party.

But the unions have played the key role in strangling the mass opposition that emerged to the government’s pandemic policies. They have yet to call a single strike to protect their members. They fully backed the reopening of schools and ending of mitigations and have adopted the “learn to live with the virus” mantra. They insisted that “schools are the safest place for children to be” and that “schools must stay open”. COVID is only referred as a disruption to children’s education.

The latest news bulletin of the NEU admits there are risks to their members, but states, “With the start of term likely to drive a further wave, our focus remains on preventing educational disruption as we enter the critical autumn and winter months when the virus has the potential to cause most harm, possibly through new variants.”

The limited measures that were implemented during the pandemic were the exclusive product of independent action by educators, workers and parents. It was the mass petitioning of parents that ensured the first lockdown. It was the action of tens and thousands of teachers who under Section 44 of the Employment Act refused to work in unsafe schools that led to the January 2021 lockdown.

The only strike organised was by parent Lisa Diaz, who called on parents to keep their children home on Fridays last October and won support across the UK and globally.

The education union’s contempt for their members extends to a refusal to mobilise any opposition to austerity cuts, privatisation and horrendous working conditions. Low pay, long hours and COVID have driven many teachers out of the profession. A survey revealed that 15 percent of new teachers go on to quit after just a year, 25 percent do so within three and 40 percent within ten.

Billions have been poured into the proxy war in Ukraine as education budgets are slashed and many schools confront bankruptcy. Schools face between 300-500 percent increases in energy costs. They will be forced to sack teachers and support staff, increase class sizes and turn off the heating.

Teachers have suffered a decade of wage freezes and have now been awarded just 5 percent for this financial year. Even this must come from schools’ budgets and with most schools in deficit will likely not be implemented.

The unions have refused to call any strikes for an above inflation award, demands for increase in school budgets or an end to the academisation of all schools by 2030. In Scotland, Unison, GMB and Unite called off a planned strike of school support staff this week to present a below inflation offer of “up to”, 10 percent, but with the majority of workers offered 4 percent. The teaching unions only plan to have an “indicative ballot” in September as a negotiating tool, with the “possibility” of a ballot for strike action in the new year!

The pandemic has exposed these organisations as corporate tools in

the imposition of mass murder and mass poverty. The necessary struggle to protect lives, jobs and working conditions will not come from these moribund organisations.

The Labour Party acts as coalition partners to the Tory government. Their shadow health secretary has declared, “For the sake of our children we can never shut our country again”, while leader Sir Keir Starmer threatens to discipline MPs who even attend picket lines and rails against “magic money tree” economics like the Tory he is.

Build rank-and-file committees

Teachers must mobilise their collective strength, unify across the UK and internationally, and prepare for strikes across the education sector as part of a general strike.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in solidarity with the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), must be the axis for building local rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators to fight for:

- The elimination of COVID-19 and monkeypox! The only thing standing in the way of eliminating these diseases is capitalism and the subordination of public health to private profit. Schools must temporarily switch to remote learning, as part of a broader strategy to stop infections, including mass testing, contact tracing, universal mask mandates, and all public health measures needed to stop viral transmission.

- The expropriation of the billionaires and pandemic profiteers! The billions handed to the rich during the pandemic must be redistributed to provide all workers and parents with money to stay home while both pandemics are contained, and to provide universal high-speed internet, remote learning infrastructure, health care, and mental health and special education support to all students. These resources must also be used to modernise all school buildings, including installation of hyper filters and ventilation systems.

- Massive pay increases to hire and retain educators! Teachers cannot teach properly if their classrooms are overcrowded, or they are forced to cover multiple lessons. Substantial pay increases are needed to compensate for years of stagnating wages, including automatic cost-of-living provisions to keep up with inflation.

The fight against the pandemic and the defence and expansion of state education is inextricably connected to the mobilisation of the entire working class to take political power in Britain and around the world and reorganise economic life on the basis of social need, that is, to replace capitalism with socialism.

To join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee click here.



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