

Child hunger “single biggest challenge” facing UK schools

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4 October 2022

School children are eating erasers (rubbers) to curb hunger pains while others are hiding at playtime or pretending to eat from empty lunch boxes to disguise that they have no food.

These are just some of the harrowing accounts made to the *Observer* by charities and teaching staff across the UK. Their Dickensian accounts of families and children left without food comes ahead of a report by healthy eating charity, Chefs in Schools on the scale of hunger among school children.

There is a “heart-breaking” increase in hungry children, the charity reports, with school chefs “actively going out and finding the kids who are hiding in the playground because they don’t think they can get a meal and feeding them.”

“We are hearing about kids who are so hungry they are eating rubbers [erasers] in school,” said Naomi Duncan, chief executive of Chefs in Schools. “Kids are coming in having not eaten anything since lunch the day before.”

Currently all infant school children from reception to year two are entitled to free school meals. After that, strict regulations mean that only those whose parents earn less than £7,400 can claim.

Almost two million children receive free lunches, and some 2,000 schools are currently signed up to a national programme to provide subsidised breakfasts.

Child hunger became a political issue at the start of the pandemic in 2020 when children lost their only meal of the day during lockdowns. A campaign by footballer Marcus Rashford led to free school meals being made available for a limited period but only in the face of bitter resistance by the then Johnson government.

But child poverty is rising—from 4.1 million in 2018 to 4.3 million this year. A report by the Childhood

Trust in December forecast nearly one-third of all children would go hungry that winter. The situation is much worse this year. Headteachers describe child hunger as the “single biggest challenge” schools face, amid reports of teachers buying toasters to feed children too hungry to learn.

Child hunger is driven by the raging cost of living crisis, due to the economic impact of NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine and a deliberate policy of inflation aimed at bringing on a recession to suppress wage demands. The main complaint of the international markets at the Truss government’s cut in the top rate of tax—a key measure in last month’s mini-budget, but now reversed--was that it hasn’t been immediately accompanied by cuts in welfare and spending.

Paul Gosling, of the National Association of Headteachers told the newspaper, “The government knows that when kids turn up in the morning hungry and cold, schools will step in and help. But it’s not right that it’s being left to us with no extra support.”

Headteachers have already said they may have to cut the school week due to the increases in gas and electricity charges, as well as government demanding any increase in teachers’ pay be paid out of school budgets. As millions are forced into poverty, many more children will be left without adequate food and warmth.

This social catastrophe explodes the claims of government and the media, supported by the Labour Party and the trade unions, to justify junking all COVID-19 mitigations.

Then the mantra was that schools should be fully open because “education, education, education” was the priority. Millions of children have consequently been infected and reinfected with COVID-19 as schools are a major source of transmission.

Now schools are having to factor in shortening the week because they do not have the funds to stay open. The mental and physical wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of children is greatly impacted by the stress of hunger, poverty and repeat infections, while teachers are having to function as social workers. This leaves little time for education in any meaningful sense. Especially as, with the winter coming, COVID cases will again explode as schools will not be able to carry out even rudimentary ventilation—such as opening windows—due to the cold.

There are now renewed calls for the extension of free school meals. The *Daily Mirror*, in partnership with the National Education Union (NEU), is recruiting footballers and celebrities to support its further roll-out amongst primary children.

NEU leader Kevin Courtney said, “Children cannot learn if they are not eating properly. It’s time government takes responsibility for a decade of austerity.”

Jonathan Ashworth, Labour’s Work and Pensions spokesperson, quoted Nelson Mandela to the party conference last month that “Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity but an act of justice.” Labour has said it will fund breakfast clubs at every primary school should it win office. The party’s education spokesperson Bridget Phillipson said this would “enable parents to work” and “help build the economy we all need.”

These are cynical, meaningless sops. Even while criticising the government’s mini-budget for its hand-out to the banks and super-rich, Labour has refused to demand an immediate general election. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer refused to answer when asked if the party thought an election should be held, saying only that Prime Minister Liz Truss should recall parliament to try and halt the slide in the pound. Its sole concern is to build its credit with international markets, insisting that it will not make any “rash” spending decisions.

Most critically, Labour and the trade unions are working to suppress a growing strike wave and enforce below inflation pay rises, forcing millions more families into hardship. Calls for more breakfast clubs in primary schools are solely to ensure parents can be made to work on dwindling wages. None of them even question how children are to eat outside of school time, or how older children are meant to manage.

As the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee (UK) explained in its statement, “No to another school year of mass infections, deaths, and education cuts!” none of this is inevitable.

“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.”



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