

No to teaching in unsafe UK schools and yet more education cuts!

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Teachers, support staff and children are returning to UK classrooms that are in danger of collapsing at any moment. Hundreds of schools were built between the 1950s and 1990s using a type of cheap concrete (RAAC) that is prone to collapse at the end of a 30-year lifespan. Government has known of the dangers since 1995.

Conservative government Schools Minister Nick Gibb revealed to the media Friday morning, three days before schools were due to open, that over the summer a beam collapsed on school premises, despite no external signs it was a “critical risk”. This confirmed that at least another 100 schools previously identified by the government as using RAAC were in danger. Remedial work had only been ordered at 50.

With pupils and teachers at risk of being crushed to death, the government moved to shut a few schools, but it has still not released a full list of those known to be dangerous. In reality, thousands of schools throughout the UK are likely to have used RAAC in their construction.

Even if buildings don’t collapse, any form of structural damage could rain down deadly asbestos dust from insulation in around 81 percent of primary and secondary state schools in England. It means any remedial work will be complex and extremely costly.

Asbestos in classrooms has been responsible for the deaths of approximately 10,000 pupils and teachers during the last four decades. According to the National Education Union (NEU), 300 school staff have died from mesothelioma since 2001, a deadly cancer associated with asbestos exposure.

The government will do nothing serious to make schools safe. But neither will the Labour Party and the trade unions. Otherwise, they would be insisting that the school term be delayed until there is a proper assessment of risks and a plan to remedy them, telling educators not to attend until this has been agreed. Nothing less is required.

Education unions sell out pay dispute

In the last year, teachers fought back in their hundreds of

thousands against the impact of austerity cuts and privatisation, compounded by the COVID pandemic. This was part of a strike wave including workers in the National Health Service, at Royal Mail, the rail industry, bus companies, British Telecom, and local government—which have all been, or are in danger of being sold out by the trade unions.

Teachers walked out for a 12 percent pay rise to match inflation after suffering a decline in earnings of 17 percent since 2010. On August 1, the National Education Union, with 300,000 members, pushed through a pay deal worth 6.5 percent that also covered support staff—with inflation in double digit figures for most of the previous year. They were joined by the NASUWT and National Association of Head Teachers. The smaller ASCL began the rout in July.

Teachers had no confidence in the NEU to wage any real fight, after the union limited action to just eight national strike days over seven months, while making constant futile appeals to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan. Joint leaders Kevin Courtney and Mary Boustead called on teachers to “bank” the offer, claiming they would “continue the campaign” after ending strike action. But their real concern was to secure their own position as “part of the [workload] taskforce” alongside the government and management.

Incoming General Secretary Daniel Kebede also supported the sellout deal. Boosted by the pseudo-left organisations, who make up 30 percent of the NEU executive, Kebede emulated his hero, former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, by throwing in the towel, exposing the myth that the unions can be transformed into fighting organizations.

Schools have lost £10 billion due to budget cuts since 2010

Schools already facing an existential crisis will be driven into bankruptcy by the RAAC and asbestos crisis without the immediate provision of billions in additional funding. School-age education has been decimated by funding cuts. Between 2010 and 2019, total public spending on education across Britain fell by £10 billion, or 8 percent in real terms. Putting the

RAAC and asbestos crisis directly in perspective, since 2010, already inadequate capital spending on school buildings has declined by fully 50 percent.

Research for the Unison union found that a child starting school in England in 2010 lost out on a cumulative £5,384 in funding over their 13 years in the education system as annual spending per child was reduced. A survey by the National Association of Head Teachers found that over 50 percent of schools anticipate being over budget in 2022-23 and 90 percent in 2023-24, threatening job losses.

The 6.5 percent pay deal is neither fully funded nor “properly funded” and will also exacerbate the budget crisis.

Schools already face an unprecedented crisis in teacher retention and recruitment due to the poor pay, long work weeks of up to 60 hours and a bureaucratic, regimented system of targets and teaching criteria which mitigate against any child-centred learning. Class sizes have ballooned, with primary schools reporting sizes of 35, and heads in some secondary schools anticipating a rise to 60. Head teachers are contemplating either shortening the school day or moving to a four-day week. Funding for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEND) provision is being cut, with the criteria for support tightened.

Meanwhile Ofsted inspections are being used to force schools to become academies, set up by Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010) to end local authority control and run schools as businesses. In January, headteacher Ruth Perry took her own life, driven to suicide after her school, Caversham Primary, failed its Ofsted inspection on bogus safeguarding issues. Teachers have protested the draconian inspections and academisation system, including the successful campaign waged at King Edward school in Sheffield.

School staff and pupils go back to COVID infested classrooms

Schools for working-class pupils are regarded by the ruling class as nothing more than holding pens. Children are to be kept in classrooms at all costs so that their parents can churn out profits for the corporations—whether this means schools becoming incubators for the spread of COVID, or roofs coming crashing down on their heads!

The attitude of the government to the RAAC and asbestos crisis was prefigured during the first two years of the COVID pandemic by the insistence that schools reopen without mitigations with the virus still raging out of control. Most children have now had Covid at least once. By September 2022, at least 142 children and 570 educators had lost their lives to the virus, and thousands of staff and children are among the two million who have had their lives blighted by Long

COVID. Scientists now link COVID infection to neurological damage, affecting children’s ability to concentrate.

Staff and children begin the term without any mitigation measures at all, despite UV lighting and HEPA filters being proven to work. Lack of testing gives free rein to the virus to spread in schools, and from there to the wider community. A heavily mutated Sars-Cov-2 variant, BA.2.86 (Pirola), has been detected around the world and now in Britain, where reported cases doubled in a week. Faced with this catastrophe, Ofsted is cracking down on school attendance, with parents like Sarah Paxman with vulnerable children facing fines and even imprisonment for trying to shield them at home.

For a fully funded and safe public education system: the way forward

The unions are deflecting the anger of their members down the blind alley of supporting the right-wing Labour party led by Sir Keir Starmer in the next general election. Starmer was instrumental in working with the Tory government to achieve the unsafe reopening of schools. He has made clear there will not be an extra penny to spend on education or to address the cost-of-living crisis and basic social needs—with any additional spending channelled solely to the armed forces and waging war against Russia in Ukraine.

If ever there was an immediate need to build rank-and-file organisations, independent of the rotten trade union bureaucracy, it is one in which the safety of thousands of workers and millions of children is under immediate threat. To make schools safe and provide decent education for all by teachers paid a proper living wage, we demand an end to the squandering of society’s wealth on war and subventions to the banks and corporations. The grotesque fortunes of the super-rich must be confiscated and used to meet pressing social needs.

Educators must take the fight out of the hands of the corporatist trade unions and build rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces. This is part of a global strategy to unify the struggles of the working class by building the IWA-RFC (International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees) to fight for socialism.



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