UK schools, hospitals, houses and other public buildings at risk of collapse in expanding RAAC concrete scandal

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Since the government revealed last Friday that over 150 schools had been identified as at risk of collapse due to the use of RAAC concrete, three days before they were due to reopen for the start of term, evidence of a far more widespread problem and of countless warnings ignored has been pouring in.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete is a lightweight material mostly used for flat roofing between the 1950s and the 1990s—cheaper and quicker to produce and install. Moisture and polluted air significantly reduce its strength over time. It was given a usable lifespan of roughly 30 years, though a Building Research Establishment report in 2002 warned that there was a risk of collapse without warning in panels over 20 years old.

Over 100 schools have been ordered to fully or partially close, with "mitigations"—largely consisting of propping up faulty roofs—already in place at another 50.

It is only through sheer luck that no one has yet been seriously hurt or killed. Collapses involving RAAC are known to have taken place in schools in 2017, 2018 and this summer, fortunately while the buildings were empty.

Thousands of children and school workers are potentially still at risk. According to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan, around 1,500 schools are yet to complete checks to find out whether they have RAAC, and another 450 suspect they do but are waiting for an official assessment. The fact that the problem was investigated by survey rather than an urgent system of inspections is a crime meaning dangerous cases of RAAC have been missed elsewhere.

Government statements that 95 percent of schools are likely to be unaffected suggests around 700 with problems. The NAHT union has written to the government noting that it told the National Audit Office in May, "that there were 8,600 schools which might have RAAC that had not been investigated."

Urgent warnings have been sounded for years. The Local Government Association has raised the issue repeatedly since 2018. In 2019, the Standing Committee on Structural Safety labelled RAAC a "significant risk". The Office for Government Property reported in 2021 and 2022 that RAAC was "now life-expired and liable to collapse".

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was told while serving as Boris Johnson's Chancellor that there was "a critical risk to life" in schools if rebuilding work was not carried out. The former head civil servant at the Department for Education told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme Monday that they had requested the money to rebuild 300-400 schools a year and were given the funds for just 100 by Sunak, which was later cut to 50.

Sunak and current Chancellor Jeremy Hunt have taken the same attitude even in the face of popular uproar. With pictures of collapsed classrooms on the front of every newspaper, Treasury officials briefed that there would be no new money made available either to fix building or provide alternative accommodation and transport. It would have to come from the existing, savaged, education budget. Statements to the contrary have been made since, but with no details provided.

According to the National Audit Office, RAAC is present in at least 41 hospitals. Twenty-four of these have buildings identified as at risk of collapse, with seven hospitals requiring a full rebuild. Documents seen by the *Sunday Times* warn of "catastrophic" and "likely" collapse. Many trusts already have steel and wooden props in place, with staff being asked to carry out regular inspections.

The problem is compounded by asbestos, present in 90 percent of schools and hospitals. To date, the official

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response to Britain's worst work-related killer—inhaled particles are highly carcinogenic—has been to "manage" the substance in place, on the basis that it is only unsafe when damaged or disturbed. Collapses, or even minor structural damage, could therefore release clouds of toxic fibres.

Court and other government buildings have also been flagged for RAAC, with Harrow Crown Court already closed for at least nine months.

Building survey Rapleys has warned the material is also very likely to have been used in flat roof, low rise public housing developments, putting a huge number of households in danger. Work it has conducted on the public estate previously suggests 5-10 percent of public buildings from the 50s, 60s and 70s use RAAC panels.

The one certainty is that the government has no idea of the full scale of the emergency and is trying to keep a lid on what it does know. Sunak insisted that he was in no way responsible for his own actions when chancellor, while an embattled Gillian Keegan was recorded proclaiming that she had done a "f…ing good job", while unnamed "others" had "sat on their arses".

RAAC is a prime example of a crumbling public infrastructure, sabotaged by relentless funding cuts. Schools in the UK have a maintenance and repair backlog of £11.4 billion—more than a third of buildings in the school estate are past their initial design life. The figure for the National Health Service is £10 billion, and for the courts, £1 billion. Outstanding repairs on roads total £14 billion, and another £6 billion on bridges. The estimated cost of post-Grenfell fire remedial work on tower blocks is £15 billion. Figures are not available, but the state of disrepair across the UK's council housing estate is infamous.

All of mainstream politics is designed to conceal the basic cause of the UK's worsening health, education and general living standards—the funnelling of an ever-greater share of social wealth into the bank accounts of the super-rich and the major corporations.

The Labour Party has tried to score a few propaganda points against the Tories for even refusing to provide a list of impacted schools and for its constant public spending cuts. They have even pointed to a commitment of funding for school construction made prior to the election of the Tories in 2010—13 years ago! But Labour under Sir Keir Starmer now boasts of its unbreakable commitment to "fiscal responsibility." By pledging to big business and the banks to spend no more than the Tories, Labour is promising to do nothing to address crises like the RAAC scandal or any of the hundred other social issues confronting the working class. Only two weeks ago, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves was writing off tax rises for the super-rich with the line "[I] don't have any spending plans that require us to raise £12 billion."

Labour and the Tories are the parties of a financial and corporate oligarchy and their upper middle-class hangers-on, whose privately educated and insured families have no stake whatsoever in preserving a decent education or any other social right to the broad mass of the working class.

In 1975, the value of public assets was equal to 137 percent of annual national income, while the value of private assets was 365 percent. By 2021, private wealth had grown to 650 percent—mostly held by a small fraction of the population—while public wealth had fallen to negative 75 percent, taking account of government debts. Catastrophic events like the Grenfell Tower fire and the experiences of millions in the pandemic testify to the terrible consequences of this looting.

A political struggle must be taken up by the working class on all fronts to reclaim the wealth of the parasitic oligarchy and invest it in social goods. This will have to be done independently of and in conflict with the trade unions, which have done nothing to defend budgets, pay or workers' health in any sector. Just months after having their strikes sold out by the education and health unions, school and hospital staff face another crisis that demands a fightback.

Rank-and-file committees should be formed to plan action demanding full, professional risk assessments and an immediate, fully funded programme of building works—paid for out of the profits of the corporations and wealth of the super-rich, starting with the companies still leeching billions a year out of the NHS through PFI schemes. Resources must be made available to minimise the disruption to children and patients, but there must be no return to unsafe schools until this is done.

This work should be coupled with the implementation of measures in all schools and hospitals to track and suppress the COVID-19 virus which threatens to place more strain on the health service this autumn and winter.

Contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) and NHS FightBack today.

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