

Raac concrete scandal shows Britain is collapsing: Fight for safe schools, hospitals and social housing!

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The Raac concrete scandal is among the biggest public safety scandals in living memory. Amid the mass disruption of children's education, it is becoming clear that thousands of lives are threatened by the possible catastrophic collapse of schools, hospitals, public buildings and social housing.

The structural collapses in schools that finally forced Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative government to reveal the danger posed, just days before the beginning of term, occurred without warning.

Over a hundred schools are fully or partially closed. At least 450 suspect the presence of RAAC (Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete). In over a thousand, even the initial work of checking for the material has not been completed.

Successive governments, Tory and Labour, did nothing despite known risks. Concerns had been raised about the safety of Raac roof planks as early as the mid-1990s. The government only initiated an investigation into the use of Raac in schools in 2018 following the collapse of the roof of a primary school in Kent, just 24 hours after the onset of structural stress indicators.

In September 2022, the Cabinet Office's property arm told Whitehall property leaders, "Raac is now life-expired and liable to collapse." In December 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) annual report warned, "There is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools." A leaked email sent to Downing Street from senior officials at the DfE in December said many school buildings posed a "risk to life." In August 2023, the Health and Safety Executive announced that "Raac is now life-expired. It is liable to collapse with little or no notice."

The government only agreed to remedial work on 50 schools of the 150 confirmed to have Raac through its own survey and subsequent inspections. More than one in seven schools on the list, 22, were denied any urgent funding.

In Scotland, a Freedom of Information request revealed in May that at least 37 schools were built with some Raac. To date, 13 universities have announced closures of lecture theatres, science labs, student union facilities and other buildings.

The problem is far wider in scope. Raac was used in many public buildings projects from the 1950s until the mid-1990s. Unlike traditional concrete, it is estimated to have a lifespan of approximately 30 years and is susceptible to structural failure, particularly when exposed to moisture. It was often used improperly during construction, especially in roofing.

Matt Byatt, president of the Institution of Structural Engineers, said that any high-rise buildings with flat roofs constructed between the

late 1960s and early 1990s may contain Raac, which he described as a "bubbly, breezeblock" type material which acts like a "sponge".

Building surveyor Rapleys has suggested 5-10 percent of public buildings, including social housing, built in the 1950s-1980s are likely to contain Raac. Estates still occupied by residents have already been identified, with the social housing regulator writing to landlords warning them to investigate their stock urgently.

In the National Health Service (NHS), Raac planks are thought to be present in at least 34 hospitals in England, with more than 250 NHS buildings possibly built using Raac in Scotland. The government has said it will rebuild seven hospitals most affected, but only by 2030.

At the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, ceilings built with Raac are presently supported by more than 2,400 props. Hinchingsbrooke in Cambridgeshire has banned obese patients from having surgery in any operating theatres not on the ground floor. Collapse, as with schools, could release deadly asbestos fibres.

NHS England has sent a letter to all 224 NHS Trusts telling them to familiarise themselves with evacuation plans in the event buildings start to collapse.

Last month, Harrow Crown Court in north-west London was shut—one of six court buildings using Raac. The Ministry of Justice is investigating whether prisons have been built with Raac and the Ministry of Defence has been examining hundreds of barracks and training facilities.

The response of the government has been a stream of lies seeking to play down the scale of the emergency and justify its sociopathic disregard for life, with Education Secretary Gillian Keegan protesting against media "sensationalism" and Schools Minister Nick Gibb arguing that the response to Raac has been "world-leading".

If the UK is world-leading in anything, it is in the destructive greed of its financial-corporate-political ruling class. The Raac scandal underscores the scale of social vandalism in a society run as a feeding trough for super-rich parasites, fuelled by the exploitation of the working class.

A decades-long looting operation, with wealth transferred from the working class and state services to the major corporations and the financial oligarchy, has gutted society. In 1991, the top 1 percent owned 18 percent of national wealth and the next 9 percent owned 33.4 percent; by 2021, this had climbed to 21.3 percent and 35.8 percent. What remains of the post-war welfare state is being starved to death.

Britain's failed state

Even before news of Raac broke, schools were in deep financial crisis. The education capital budget was cut in half between 2010 and 2022, with warnings that up to 90 percent of schools will be in deficit in the next two years. The proportion of universities reporting a deficit has increased from 5 percent in 2015/16 to 32 percent in 2019/20.

In the NHS, between 2010 and 2019 the government spent 20 percent less per person on health each year than the average of 14 similar European countries, a cumulative underspend of £400 billion. Per person spending on social care fell by between 2.8 percent and 6.8 percent in the poorest three fifths of local authorities between 2011 and 2020.

In housing, around 165,000 social homes were lost (either sold or demolished without replacement) between 2012/13 and 2021/22, even as the waiting list for social housing grew to 1.2 million and private rents and mortgage costs spiralled out of control.

In public transport, more than half of trains departing Britain's 15 busiest rail station were delayed or cancelled in 2022. Two-thirds of local bus routes have been cut since 2010, with a massive 20 percent drop last year alone.

Twenty six local authorities providing vital local services to millions of people are on the verge of bankruptcy, with several already going bust. They face a collective funding gap of £3 billion over the next two years.

Millions of workers are being thrown into destitution. Of the 6 million families in poverty, a third are in "deep poverty" (50 percent or more below the breadline) and struggling to buy food, energy and clothes, and to pay rent and bills.

Capitalist crisis, austerity and the Labour Party

The attempt by the Labour Party to capitalise on the behaviour of the Tories is grotesque. Much of the privatisation and enriching of the top one percent was carried out by Tony Blair's government (1997-2007), which proclaimed itself "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich". His successor Gordon Brown ended his time in office by handing hundreds of billions to Britain's banks and boardrooms following the 2008 financial crash.

Today, party leader Sir Keir Starmer heads a cabinet of ultra-Blairites committed to the continuation of Tory austerity, low taxes for the rich and nothing for workers and essential services. His Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves has denounced the Tories for overspending and his Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting has declared war on the NHS.

If Starmer were in office, the war on the working class would continue unabated, as would the war waged by NATO in Ukraine against Russia. He is just as reliant as the Tories on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress and betray the growing militancy in the working class that produced last summer's strike wave and will break out again.

Multiple, interacting world crises, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit at home and abroad, have undermined all the parties of big business and created the conditions for an explosive eruption of class struggle.

In Ukraine, the NATO-Russia war continues to produce mass casualties so appalling that the media is under instruction not to report them. There is a constant threat of an escalation into a global conflict, with Britain—which may soon host US nuclear weapons again for the first time in more than 15 years—in the frontline. The order of the day is a rapid increase in military spending, reversing the post-Cold War "peace dividend" through the decimation of health, education and welfare provision.

The world economy is stuttering, even in previous engines of growth like China and Germany, with economists warning of "storm clouds ahead" and other euphemisms for crisis and recession.

Almost 230,000 people have been killed by COVID-19, and 2 million left with long-term debilitation thanks to an official policy of "letting the virus rip." New variants of the virus are expected to surge again this autumn and winter.

For rank-and-file committees and a new socialist leadership

The working class faces not merely a struggle against a hated government, but against capitalism. It is the ownership and control of production exercised by the financial oligarchy and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states that is the root cause of deepening social inequality, the turn to dictatorial forms of rule, and the explosive growth of militarism and war.

The attempt to make the working class pay for the deepening crisis of British and world imperialism has brought social and political tensions between the super-rich—plus the affluent upper middle class layers that serve them—and the mass of working people to breaking point. This must now be given organisational and political expression.

The betrayal of almost every strike that has erupted over the past year, including those involving postal workers, rail workers, teachers, lecturers, nurses and other NHS workers confirms that no effective struggle can be mounted against the government and the employers without an organised rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy. This means building rank-and-file committees, democratically led by the most trusted workers, to organise a fightback which ties the struggle in defence of jobs and wages to one for measures to protect children, students and workers from the threat to life posed by Raac, and renewed surges of Covid-19.

This pitches the working class against the entire ruling elite, its Tory, Labour and Scottish Nationalist parties, and the state apparatus wielded as a weapon against workers. It is a political struggle against austerity, militarism and capitalism, and for socialism. It demands the building of a new party of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, must be that new leadership.



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