

UK government and education unions leave life threatening RAAC crisis unaddressed

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The ongoing RAAC crisis in UK public buildings reveals the same malign neglect by the government that led to the avoidable deaths to date of around 230,000 during the pandemic.

Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete (RAAC) is a lightweight, cheap concrete that was used widely in the 1950s-1980s, with a design life of 30 years after which it can collapse without warning. In 1982, RAAC production in the UK ceased amid safety concerns, however, there was no attempt to monitor or replace it.

The presence of RAAC is just one of many problems plaguing public buildings. The widespread use of, and failure to remove, cancer-inducing asbestos has caused 10,000 deaths from mesothelioma over the past four decades. Another form of cheap concrete, High Alumina Cement (HAC), is also causing problems.

The BBC reported that Cleveland School in Somerset has closed 22 classrooms and erected marquees as it has beams made of HAC, which degrades if it gets damp. The school was built in 1962, when HAC was used widely for its quick-setting properties. Work is underway to build a two-story portacabin to house pupils.

Buildings containing RAAC include schools, nurseries, housing estates, colleges, universities, hospitals, airports and even the House of Commons. The Harlequin Theatre and library in Surrey has closed pending an inspection. RAAC was found in a former Marks and Spencer store in Wokingham that the council planned to occupy. Oxford University students at St Catherine's College are studying in marquees after RAAC was found, affecting the library, dining hall and 152 bedrooms.

The problem is widespread and deadly serious, but the government is dragging its feet over inspecting, let alone remedying, the problem.

The confirmed number of schools with RAAC on September 14 was 174. The government will update the list only *every two weeks*, next on October 3. In all

likelihood, the numbers revealed so far are the tip of the iceberg. The National Audit Office (NAO) estimates 38 percent of school buildings contain RAAC.

In Scotland, no more than half the 254 National Health Service buildings, including hospitals suspected of containing RAAC, have been surveyed.

Remedial work is proceeding at a glacial pace, and chaos reigns. Stepney All Saints School in London was told to close two weeks into term, even though it had previously identified RAAC and informed the Department for Education (DfE), which approved its mitigations.

The unserious nature of government approved “mitigations” can be garnered from DfE Under Secretary of State Baroness Barran's comments to parliament. In addition to using portacabins as temporary classrooms, she suggested “semi-permanent” timber be secured beneath areas with RAAC that could last for up to 10 years.

The government remains vague about the timetable for refurbishing or rebuilding RAAC schools, which Education Secretary Gillian Keegan claims will be financed through capital grants or the school rebuilding programme. Head teachers report that schools have not received firm financial commitments from the government to underwrite costs. They fear a downward spiral and closure, as parents transfer children elsewhere.

According to Permanent Secretary at the DfE Susan Acland-Hood, many schools will not be rebuilt until 2030, and the school building programme has only 100 spare slots. She made an empty promise that “the next spending review will allow us to increase the total number if we need to.”

At St Leonard's Catholic School in County Durham, locals have set up a campaign group to demand the school is rebuilt, holding a demonstration on September 27 when Baroness Barran visited.

The secondary school with 1,400 pupils is not even top

of the rebuild list. Since term began, pupils have been taught online for four days week. Those attending school on certain days are taught in corridors or the sports hall. The school governors have been trying to get extra funding for building work since 2006.

Angry parents expressed their outrage on social media. Roger Barrett wrote on X/Twitter: “Your [ruling Conservative] party has known about RAAC and the potential for catastrophe yet you’ve done nothing until the last moment. Now you expect parents, pupils, staff to be grateful.”

Helen Tracey wrote: “The government has refused our school funding for portacabins meaning only one day per week in school for our kids standing in corridors writing on clipboards.”

Despite having hundreds of thousands of members risking life and limb, the education unions are doing nothing. They have not even broached the subject of Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which allows workers to walk off the job if they fear for their safety.

In January 2021, amid a huge surge of COVID cases, school workers threatened to do so en masse, forcing the unions and the government to abandon school reopening plans and implement a renewed lockdown, saving many lives.

Fearful of a repeat, the unions are directing anger and opposition into appeals to a government which has proved time and again its indifference to human life. The NAHT, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the National Education Union (NEU), NASUWT and the GMB issued a pleading letter to Keegan to provide the resources to make schools safe.

This after Keegan arrogantly responded to initial reporting of the life-threatening RAAC crisis as “sensationalist.” She told parliament on September 19, in words beyond satire, “In terms of the portacabins, I’ve seen and met children in the portacabins and at the first school the children were petitioning me to stay in the portacabin which they preferred to the classroom. Portacabins are very, very high quality.”

On September 25, the NEU, ASCL, NAHT, GMB, UNISON, Unite and Community trade unions representing more than three million workers wrote to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak asking for a commitment in the Autumn budget statement for a £4.4 billion annual increase in spending on school building, to £7 billion a year. Trades Union Congress general secretary Paul Nowak said, “We need the government to commit to a

programme of capital investment that repairs and rebuilds our public estate.”

This is totally inadequate. In May 2021, years before the RAAC scandal broke, the DfE estimated a repair and maintenance backlog of £11.4 billion—up from £6.7 billion (as estimate by the NAO) just four years previously.

Even the pittance demanded by the unions will be ignored by the government. As Chancellor under Boris Johnson, Sunak cut school rebuilding funding despite warnings over a “critical risk to life”. Former permanent secretary to the DfE Jonathan Slater accused Sunak of cutting new school rebuilds to 50 a year, when what was needed was 300 to 400. Dozens of schools with RAAC had plans for rebuilds binned or bids for work turned down in the past decade.

Investment in education is the last thing any government, whether Conservative or Labour, intends, committed as they are to ensuring British business increases its profitability and military spending increases for the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine.

Educators and children face years herded into substandard buildings only fit for demolition. Schools are neither structurally sound nor safe from the spread of new COVID variants, lacking even the basic mitigation measures to ensure clean air, such as HEPA filters and UV light disinfection systems.

The working class must intervene in the situation independently of the unions with its own rank-and-file committees. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is committed to the redeployment of the wealth being squandered by the rich to provide the resources necessary to rebuild schools and adequately fund education, health and all public services.

Contact us to receive the Educators’ Newsletter/get involved with the Committee’s work.



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