

“It’s not safe for my kids but they are forcing me to send them to school”

UK Educators Rank-and-File Committee holds initial meeting

By our reporter
9 September 2020

The first meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee in the UK was attended by teachers and parents from across Britain. Speakers and participants also joined from the US, Germany, Italy, and Australia.

Tania Kent, a special needs teacher and leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, explained that the meeting was part of an international struggle against the coronavirus pandemic. The drive to reopen schools was a focal point of the class struggle, with teachers and students being sent back into classrooms to force parents back to work. This is meeting mounting opposition from educators, parents, students, and throughout the working class.

“The aim of this meeting is to provide this growing global resistance, including within the UK, with a conscious programme and an instrument through which it can fight. The launching of the educators rank and file safety committee, to organise a general strike, is the only viable means of uniting opposition to the homicidal policies of the government.”

Kent painted a terrible picture of the conditions she and her colleagues faced on returning to school. “I can only describe the past few days as the week from hell, and this sentiment is shared by many. The level of stress and exhaustion is quite overwhelming. This is all conscious. You are isolated unable to meet with colleagues and offload, you learn to grow eyes at the back of your head, trying to keep things safe, but you know the children in your care are not safe, your colleagues are not safe, their families are not safe.”

We are “not all in this together”, Kent said, since this was the “poor man’s virus” impacting disproportionately on the most disadvantaged. Over 800,000 had died globally and over 41,000 officially in the UK--“Deaths which were entirely preventable but for the criminally negligent policies of the ruling elites the world over.”

In contrast the pandemic had been a “godsend for the rich”. Billionaires had enjoyed “a bonanza”, increasing their wealth by \$282 billion.

“It is this class reality that underpins all aspects of the response to the pandemic by governments, which have been characterised by a total disregard for the health, safety and well-being of the vast majority of the population.”

With infections increasing by the thousands, 1.5 million education staff and over 10 million children had been sent back to unsafe schools over the past week. The government guidelines were a farce, with “no grounding in science whatsoever.”

“How can any workplace be ‘Covid secure’, under conditions where this deadly virus is circulating globally and has not been contained, let alone in schools which don’t have even the minimal safety protections that have been granted for adults? This is fake news of the tallest order.”

After being open for just a few days, eight schools in England had

already had to close due to infections, including three in Bradford. In Scotland, where the schools reopened earlier on the orders of the Scottish National Party government, infection spikes had been reported in Glasgow, with the city council warning that nearly 200 schools in the city could be shut if local lockdown measures proved ineffective.

Kent pointed to the role of the Labour Party and the trade unions, which had dissipated, disoriented, and derailed the outpouring of mass opposition to the deadly “herd immunity” policy of Boris Johnson’s Conservative government.

“They have fully supported and welcomed the reopening of schools in September, although none of five tests for the safe reopening of schools, set by the unions have been met. These demands have now been shelved, with the unions merely asking for a ‘Plan B’ to be drawn up for the inevitable COVID-19 outbreaks.”

Their role as accomplices to an unforgivable crime had not been lost on their membership, who felt like they had been stabbed in the back. “The SEP is the only organisation that is calling for the mobilisation of mass working class action to prevent the deadly reopening of schools.”

The SEP advocated a general strike as the only means to ensure that teachers and students were not forced into unsafe schools and encouraged all those participating to join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to fight for this perspective.

Speaking from the US, Dr Benjamin Mateus told the meeting that the policy of “herd immunity” advocated by the Trump administration in the US and the Johnson government in the UK placed the interests of profit above that of lives.

Dr Mateus showed how the experience of Sweden, the “poster child for herd immunity”, led to a far worse outcome in terms of per capita deaths even than the US.

He addressed the lies that children were less susceptible to infection and did not develop serious symptoms from COVID-19, that they rarely transmit the virus and so schools could be reopened “safely”. Schools could not reopen safely “because of the nature of the virus, and the social proximity.” It was not a case of children versus adults, versus the elderly, “we are a community, we all live together.”

What had saved lives in March was that schools were closed. “Children weren’t infected because they were home.” However, what is known about other diseases such as measles, polio tuberculosis, Sars, which are also airborne, is that they can be transmitted by children. Recent figures reported in the *New York Times* had shown that cases, hospitalisations and deaths were increasing far more rapidly in children than in the population as a whole.

COVID-19 is spread through minute airborne particles, called aerosols,

which can linger in the air from minutes to hours. Rooms that were poorly ventilated, like many classrooms, “are breeding grounds for transmission”.

This was not just about schools, and truly was an international issue.

In conclusion Dr Mateus cited findings by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in Seattle, indicating that some 1.9 million more people could die of COVID-19 by the end of the year. “Daily deaths could reach as high as 30,000 per day.”

Sue Philips, a primary teacher in Australia, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party and member of the Committee for Public Education in Australia explained, “Without the independent intervention of educators and workers internationally, taking matters into our own hands, the working class faces an historic catastrophe...”

“Educators are regarded as no more than childminders, totally expendable, in order to open up the economy for profit.”

Philips supported the demand outlined in the SEP (UK) statement, in defence of free speech and the protection of whistle-blowers. “We have the right and must speak out exposing the appalling conditions in the schools, the lack of resources and inadequate staffing, the deepening budget cuts and the retrogressive curriculum systematically imposed and embedded by edu-business at every level of the education system.”

This week, former Australian prime minister Tony Abbott described governments that had carried out lockdown measures to stop the spread of Covid as “health dictatorships”. The economic cost of lockdowns, he said, meant families should be allowed to consider “letting elderly relatives with the coronavirus die by letting nature take its course.”

The teachers unions in Australia were complicit in the governments murderous campaign to open schools. “Not a word of opposition has been heard from the unions in six months, instead endorsing every government diktat. Acting in partnership with government officials, they have covered up the extent of the dangers and the number of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools, desperate to divide and dissipate growing teacher and parent opposition.”

In discussion, Harvey, a classroom assistant, reported how at his primary school, staff had only been given two day’s training, largely consisting of “irrelevant protocols and policy documents that side-stepped the main issue--namely the fact that the school--along with all schools--was about to reopen to all pupils in the middle of a deadly pandemic.”

Working with children as young as three meant working in a “very physical environment where it was virtually impossible to effectively communicate with children at this stage of development, let alone enable play and learn and receive cognitive stimulation without closer contact.”

“Colleagues had had to purchase protective equipment such as face visors out of their pockets.”

Speaking from Germany, Philipp Frisch, a secondary school teacher and member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party), said it was “remarkable, despite all the differences in detail, how similar the situation in other parts of the world, including the UK, is to the one in Germany and the rest of Europe.”

German schools had begun reopening since the beginning of last month, despite the number of infections having already risen to 1,000 new cases a day.

“In many classrooms it is not possible to even open windows to make sure that fresh air can come in and to prevent the virus from spreading via aerosols, not to mention the derelict buildings and poor sanitation. A recent study examining classrooms in North-Rhine Westphalia, the most populous state in Germany, found that about half of the classrooms were unfit for use.”

The back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns were being carried out by political parties of all shades--whether it was the grand coalition government of the right-wing Christian Democrats and the Social

Democrats, the Left Party state government in Thuringia or the Greens in Baden-Württemberg, not to speak of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

This drive was accompanied by propaganda of a distinctly fascistic character. Germany’s leading news weekly *Der Spiegel* carried an article by the pro-Green Party sociologist Bernhard Gill who argued that the policy of herd immunity, while “painful for those individuals involved... also makes room for new life”.

The opposition to being forced back into unsafe schools had taken on a concrete form recently “as students from Dortmund, in Germany’s former industrial heartland, took a courageous step and formed a rank-and-file committee at their school with the help of the SGP. This committee was soon joined by teachers and parents--more committees are in preparation.”

Elisa said her two children had both started back at school on Wednesday. “I was told they would be safe, but I don’t think they can apply the safety measures in school. I was gobsmacked when I picked them up. It was insane what I saw. The children were all over each other. My immediate reaction was to run and collect my kids and take them back to the car, where I just started crying.

“I’ve never cried in that way before. In my mind, I was just thinking, I’m killing my kids.

“We are in a pandemic and I am being forced to put them in school against my will. I spoke to my kids to see if I was overreacting, but they reported there had been no handwashing whatsoever... There were no masks and no social distancing. Only one of the teachers, who was old, was wearing a mask.

“So, I think I have reasons to be concerned. I feel anxious; my youngest has mitochondrial disease.

“It’s not safe for my kids but they are forcing me to send them to school... I’m being forced to act but I just don’t know what to do, how I can fight against this?”

“I’ve been online and been in groups, so I know I’m not alone, but we don’t have the tools. I think together we have the power, but at the moment we don’t have the tools... Me and other parents, we just need help to fight against this government.”

Concluding the meeting, Kent responded to Elisa comments, “As you said yourself, you know you are not alone. This is a very broad-based sentiment... Above all the challenges that you confront are really the same as every other worker and parent and student throughout the country. That is why we insist on a unified approach.

“This is the policy being implemented by the government and which is not being opposed by the unions or the Labour Party... The only means by which it is possible for workers and parents to challenge what is a frightening and deadly situation is in a unified campaign, and it must be a political struggle.”

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The video of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee on September 5 can be viewed **here** .

The next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee will take place on Saturday, September 19, 2-4pm. To attend please register **here** .

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>