

UK: Labour schools spokesperson confirms bi-partisan “malign neglect” policy on COVID-19

By Julie Hyland
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Remarks by Labour Party education spokesperson Kate Green and the panicked response of her frontbench colleagues have underscored the policy of “malign neglect” shared by Tory and Labour alike on COVID-19.

Speaking to an online session of the Labour Party conference, Green said, “I think there’s obviously a real immediate pressure to address these funding needs for the crisis. But I think we should use the opportunity, don’t let a good crisis go to waste.

“We can really see now what happens when you under-resource schools, when you under-resource families and communities. And I think that particularly for those of us in Labour, let’s be talking now about what this has really exposed, about the way in which we’ve undervalued our whole education system.”

Her reference to not “letting a good crisis go to waste” was seized on by Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* and the right-wing *Guido Fawkes* to issue outraged denunciations of the Labour Party for seeking to use the pandemic for political advantage, when the iron rule must be national unity and no criticism of the Johnson government. The outrage is, of course, bogus. The ruling elite *has* and *is* using the pandemic, which is on track to claim the lives of 1 million people worldwide, to its advantage by passing a multibillion-pound subvention to big business, banks and hedge funds, while driving workers into unsafe workplaces, schools and universities.

Nevertheless, senior Labourites stepped in to offer their apologies, with Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy telling ITV’s *Good Morning* on Tuesday that Green was “making the point that we’ve got to now make sure this Covid crisis doesn’t worsen [the social]

divide and doesn’t write some children off. It was absolutely the wrong way to express that and Kate knows that. She feels very passionately about this. I’m sure she will apologise if she hasn’t already. Let me apologise for the way that that’s come across as well.”

Green’s address to Labour’s online congress, aside from the platitudes quoted, in fact made no substantive criticism of Johnson’s murderous “back to work/reopen schools” policies. She spoke as the number of COVID cases continued to rise to more than 41,000 officially, driven particularly by the reopening of schools from September 1. Infections have risen precipitously ever since, especially among the young, and 1,776 schools have reported cases.

Yet Labour’s education spokesperson had virtually nothing to say on this trail of death and destruction. Outlining the party’s “vision” as to how to “develop and re-energise the role of schools, colleges and universities as hubs of their community,” Green treated the pandemic as a non-event.

Far from breaking Labour’s de facto pact with the Tories, Green’s contempt and indifference for the impact of COVID-19 on working people and their families goes to its heart.

Since assuming Labour leadership on April 4, Sir Keir Starmer has been the most vociferous proponent of “reopening the economy,” especially schools. He has consistently stressed that “under my leadership we will engage constructively with the government, not opposition for opposition’s sake. Not scoring party political points or making impossible demands. ...”

Just weeks into a national lockdown, Starmer demanded a government exit-strategy.

In an April 14 letter to then-acting Prime Minister

Dominic Raab, Starmer said this should be published “now or in the coming week” and should outline “the sectors of the economy and the core public services (e.g., schools) that will most likely see restrictions eased. ...”

That day, the official daily death toll in the UK reached 744 and continued to climb. On May 5, UK fatalities became the highest in Europe and the second highest in the world.

Nonetheless, on May 10, Johnson announced schools would reopen on June 1 as central to forcing workers back into the workplace. Behind the scenes, the government and Labour were conspiring to this end.

On May 18, Starmer wrote a “confidential” letter to Johnson in which he asked “if I could help build a consensus for getting children back into our schools. I did it confidentially and privately, because I did not want to make a lot of it.”

Starmer’s letter was copied to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, offering the services of Labour and the teaching unions as central to the efficient reopening of schools. He only disclosed the letter when his offer was not taken up.

The June 1 re-opening failed in the face of mass public opposition and was pushed back to September. This led to a doubling down by Labour in its demand for a full reopening.

On August 15, as it was clear the government had no intention of delivering on its pledge for mass testing, Starmer nonetheless insisted it was a “moral duty to reopen schools. Let me send a clear message to the Prime Minister: I don’t just want all children back at school next month, I expect them back at school. No ifs, no buts, no equivocation.”

This joint offensive, backed by the teaching unions, is what enabled schools, and now universities and colleges, to reopen with disastrous consequences. And still Labour repeats its mantra that another national lockdown must be avoided at all costs.

Its concern is not the health or livelihoods of working people and their children. It is recouping the billions of pounds in bailouts handed over to the corporations, banks and hedge funds made at the start of the pandemic through driving up the exploitation of the working class.

Grotesquely, Starmer is now urging the government to put children “at the front of the queue” for testing,

while demanding schools remain open. Tests are now rationed to those with acute clinical needs, followed by care home, NHS staff and teachers in that order.

Last week, the Office for National Statistics revealed “clear evidence” that COVID-19 cases were rising amongst the young. The strongest surge in the infection rate is amongst 2- to 11-year-olds, which this month is already seven times higher than in July, albeit from a lower base rate. The infection rate is climbing across all age groups, with cases doubling every week.

The mendacity of Johnson and Starmer was on show in their staged battle during Prime Minister’s Question Time on Wednesday. Responding to Johnson’s ludicrous claim that “testing and tracing has very little or nothing to do” with the spread of COVID and that children were “low risk,” Starmer said, “ the point...isn’t whether the children have got COVID, it’s that they’ve got COVID symptoms and then they’re off school. ... The government’s own department shows that one in eight children are off school this week. That disrupts their education. *Whether it’s COVID symptoms or other symptoms is nothing to the point.*” [emphasis added]

The Labour leader’s dismissal as to whether children have COVID-19 was made as it was reported that a 52-year-old father in Blackburn had died from the virus, after his child had been told to isolate at home due to a school outbreak. Blackburn, Lancashire, had been placed under tighter restrictions as it is amongst the 10 worst-affected areas in England by COVID-19, but schools and workplaces remain open.

Parents, educators and students, join the fight against the unsafe reopening of schools, colleges and universities. To participate in the next meeting of the newly founded Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, this Saturday, September 26 at 2 p.m., click here.

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