

STOP SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SPREADING COVID!

Reopening schools in unsafe conditions will speed up the spread of the virus. We need to fight for more funding and safe learning controlled by teachers and students

Novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-19 continues to test the world's governments. None more than Boris Johnson's Tory administration, it seems, with the recent discovery of a new strain, variant B117 in the south-east of Britain, which is proving to be 56% more infectious than previous iterations of the virus.

Not only is this variant spreading rapidly to all parts of the UK and from here to the rest of Europe and the world, the latest data show that it is spreading fastest among young people, a demographic previously assumed to be less vulnerable to both the infections and the resulting disease, Covid-19.

By 18 December the number of infections among 2-24 year-olds had risen to 2,500 per 100,000, i.e. 2.5%, far higher than the national average. Alarmingly, this represents an 18- to 19-fold increase in nurseries, primary schools and post-16 education settings and an incredible 75-fold increase for secondary students.

Even if younger age groups are less likely to develop the serious form of covid, which remains a hope rather than an established fact, they still live in households and communities which include more vulnerable people. Sadly the myth that they do not transmit the disease has largely been debunked.

What we stand for

- Schools to open for children of essential workers and at-risk students only
- Form rank and file safety committees to decide on safe learning conditions
- All FE and HE learning to move online until a safe return is possible
- Requisition buildings, grounds and facilities to reduce class sizes
- For a national education service, with all schools taken into public ownership under the democratic control of workers and students

Science and the government

Confronted with this new situation scientists and epidemiologists, most notably independent SAGE and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine but elements of the government's own Scientific Advisory Group of Experts, SAGE, have begun to ring alarm bells.

Warning that we are now at the most critical point of the pandemic since April and that the number of covid deaths in 2021 may exceed those in 2020, an LSHTM study suggests that, "The most stringent intervention scenario with tier 4 (restrictions)

England-wide and schools closed during January and 2 million individuals vaccinated per week, is the only scenario we considered which reduces peak ICU (intensive care) burden below the levels seen during the first wave." The NHS currently has 40,000 nursing vacancies and remains underfunded, understaffed and overworked.

Scientists are not only concerned that the increased transmissibility of the new variant could raise the level of vaccination to achieve "herd immunity" from 67% to 80%, but also that the vaccinations may neither prevent transmission nor provide long-lasting immunity. This has led the World Health Organisation, WHO, to predict that covid could become "endemic", lurking in the global population for years, if not decades to come – unless of course the world's governments could agree on a zero-covid policy to eliminate the disease.

Unlike the governments of China, Taiwan, New Zealand and Australia, etc. Johnson and co. are doing nothing of the sort. In particular education secretary Gavin Williamson is pushing ahead with fully opening all schools in England and the resumption of some face-to-face teaching in colleges and universities. To add injury to insult, he wrote to headteachers on the last day of the autumn

term with instructions (but no resources) on how to administer the notoriously inaccurate lateral flow tests to all students and staff in the first week of January: this having already just instructed Greenwich council to withdraw advice to its schools not to only teach online for the last (as it turns out crucial) week before Christmas.

Scientists are increasingly converging on the advice that schools need more buildings, more teachers and support staff and to more strictly adhere to smaller bubbles, typically 4-5 children in primaries and 30, a class-size, in secondaries, as well as more stringent use of PPE, e.g. masks by all in classrooms. The government has ignored all of this, not even a callout for retirees and leavers (who must be paid of course) to come back to work in schools and colleges, as they did for the NHS in the first wave.

The unions

The National Education Union has rightly been praised for its pugnacious use of the media and mass, albeit limited to online engagement of its members in zoom calls, petitions and workplace activities to push for its programme of smaller bubbles, rotas of in-person/online learning, full digital equality for students and safer working conditions. They, along with management unions NAHT and ASCL, have called for schools to open no sooner than 18 January, though this now looks too optimistic according to the science.

While this is laudable and a million times better than the major support unions, Unison, GMB and Unite, and indeed puts to shame many other sectors, like the NHS, retail and industry, it remains at the level of a moral or at best legal crusade. To make this point clear, Joint General

Secretary Mary Bousted told *The Guardian*, “While industrial action is not an option... the NEU would be strongly advising members they have a legal right to work in a safe workplace.”

What Bousted is referring to here is Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which says an employee has the “right not to be subjected to any detriment [to her/his health and safety] by any act, or any deliberate failure to act, by his employer”. But this is an individual right, subject to procedural caveats, and can be challenged if the employer has “reasonable” grounds for believing it is being used as cover for collective, i.e. strike action. At best it delegates the role of organising such actions to shop stewards and workplace activists; at worst it is a deliberate and doomed attempt to disaggregate a national dispute into tens of thousands of local ones.

Locally and nationally the education unions, teaching and support staff, need to call on local authorities, especially Labour councils, to order schools and colleges to close to all except vulnerable students throughout January, to requisition buildings and recruit staff to meet demands of smaller bubbles, regular testing and vaccination. At the same time they should campaign among school and college workers, students and parents to support strike action to force the council and the government to release the resources to ensure schools become safe places of work and education.

Such a strike could be enormously popular, especially if it is linked to more resources for working class communities and full pay for those forced to isolate, and successful because the government, despite its 80 MP majority, remains vulnerable on

this issue of life and death. But it won't happen unless rank and file activists organise from below. In 2010-12 the NUT felt that rank and file pressure and led the fight against austerity; today's NEU needs to feel it again.

For a National Education Service

The pandemic has also revealed how unfair the school system in the UK is, with many state schools not only suffering teaching and support staff shortages, but also without sufficient computer suites, playing fields or outdoor spaces that could be adapted for teaching or play. Likewise local authorities and Children and Adolescents Mental Health Services, CAMHS, have been decimated by a decade of Tory cuts, meaning many working class children's education, in the broadest sense, has stagnated or even deteriorated in 2020.

Education unions and the Labour Party also need to address this situation and demand permanent as well as emergency action: increased resources and funding for all schools, so they can cater for young people's individual needs within a collective setting; expropriation of the playing fields, buildings and computer hardware and software that private schools enjoy in abundance so they can be shared by all young people; and not least restoring the sense of play, creativity and thirst for knowledge that should be at the heart of our education system, instead of exams, streaming and exclusion.

In the immediate fight for safe education now, education workers and students can lay the basis for a genuine National Education Service, with equal, safe, and high quality education for all.

If you agree with what we say, contact us to get organised, or join Red Flag, a revolutionary socialist organisation
www.redflagonline.org/join