

“Constant harassment and bullying”

At-risk UK parent describes pressure to send child into school

Our reporter
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Caroline Lea, a parent who has spoken out on social media about the threats being used to force her into sending her child into school while the pandemic rages. She is a founding member of campaign group SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All).

Caroline has severe asthma, for which she takes medication which has an immunosuppressive effect and is classified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV). She has three children and is a teacher, previously teaching Spanish at a secondary school.

In March 2020, with COVID-19 taking hold in the UK, Caroline decided to remove her children from school and educate them at home.

She was “told by consultants very early on: your outcome from this [COVID] will be very, very bad if you catch it. It’s likely to be fatal, you’re very likely to be severely hospitalised. I’m a lone parent, it’s only me for my kids. What’s going to happen to my kids if I’m hospitalised?”

Caroline was initially supported in this decision by her school, until the government-mandated return to the classrooms in September 2020.

She explained, “I said, look, I want to see how things unfold. I’d like to give it a month and see whether kids going back to school makes the cases increase, which I suspected it would and, obviously, it did.”

The headteacher “got straight back in touch and said, ‘No, I can’t authorise that anymore. We’ve been told that we have to mandate attendance. We’re not allowed to give authorised absence. If you don’t send them in it will be unauthorised and you will be open to sanctions and punitive measures.’”

The threat of legal action was especially worrying for her since, “if one day in future I want to be able to go back to my job [as a teacher], if I’m prosecuted, I’m going to lose my entire career.”

Come October-November, the school “warned that they were going to refer me to the attendance legal panel... It’s a

nasty escalation, because most schools normally, for non-attendance, just go straight to a fine, which is bad enough. But obviously they’re quite challengeable.”

Describing the pressure placed on her, Caroline said, “It’s really hard to stand your ground against a school. One parent against the machinery of the school which has the backing of the local authority and then the government.”

She added, “I kept saying, ‘which part of my life being on the line here is not considered an exceptional circumstance for absence?’”

Caroline was told, “‘You’re destroying your children’s life chances by keeping them home.’ How dare they? I said to them, I think their mental health is going to be more damaged if I die. That’s going to have a far worse and more long-term effect, losing their mother. Because they’re not actually losing any education at all. So, this is just about them not being in the school building.”

“The school gave us no learning at all,” she continued. The headteacher “said she wasn’t allowed to provide remote learning.”

The week of the attendance legal panel, Caroline “found out the school were sharing my personal medical data that I had submitted to them... I had submitted a consultant’s letter that proves that I’m very vulnerable.”

By mistake, Caroline had received a letter from the consultant which was not addressed to her, but which concerned her and her children. She discovered “the person on the letter was with an agency the local authority used to investigate whether that letter could be used in my case.

She explained, “So, the school had shared that letter, without my consent, with the local authority, who without consent shared it with this guy. And he’d then gone to the general hospital, senior management, director level, and it then cascaded down to my consultant’s level, who got completely reprimanded for this and was made to retract it in writing formally.”

Caroline was then told she could not attend the upcoming

attendance legal panel.

By December, with COVID cases in schools skyrocketing across the country, Hampshire implemented new guidance authorising absences for children with CEV family members. With the reopening of schools in March 2021, however, it was “back to the same hymn sheet.” Caroline was told, “‘COVID’s going to be here a long time so you’ve got to learn to live with it.’ So the nightmare began again.”

After she insisted on waiting until two weeks after receiving her second vaccine jab, and to see that cases were staying low, “things got really nasty... they started to contact my son’s father, who lives 300 miles away. The school started to contact him about, ‘Your son is not in school and what do you think about that?’ Causing tension between a couple who aren’t together anymore.

“All of a sudden I had a phone call from social services who said, ‘We’ve had a safeguarding referral for you’—one of the worst moments I’ve ever been through. I’d do anything for my kids. The reason they’re not in school is for safeguarding reasons. It was outrageous.”

Two weeks after her second vaccine dose, Caroline sent her son back to school, but pulled him out again when cases were reported among the pupils. She continued, “Within a couple of weeks, the entire primary school was savaged by COVID so badly that they had to close.”

In September 2021, with her son due to start secondary school, Caroline was told by the new headteacher, “Shielding’s gone now,” and has again been referred to an attendance legal panel for keeping her child at home.

Caroline stressed that she was “not just screaming from the rooftops about this because I’m vulnerable. Everybody should be allowed this choice right now. We’re in a pandemic... Remote learning should be available for whoever wants it. I don’t think anybody should be forced into attendance at the moment.

“There are people saying, ‘I am not CV or CEV, but I don’t want to catch this and I don’t want my children to catch it.’ Fair enough, you shouldn’t have to.

“I didn’t sign anything when my children were born which said, ‘at whichever point the government decides to expose them to a potentially fatal disease, you’ve got to say okay.’ That’s not something I signed up for and never will.”

Describing the government’s handling of the pandemic, Caroline said, “The vaccines, as wonderful as they are, anyone who’s sensible knows they’re not a magic bullet. I am so thankful to everybody involved in their creation and rolling them out, but they’re not going to stop everybody from getting sick, we’ve not rolled them out to everybody. And also everybody in the scientific and medical community is insisting ‘you’ve also got to protect as well!’”

“This is unacceptable what’s going on here. Deliberately, recklessly infecting children every single day... Who would let that happen in a wealthy country? I feel so disappointed that life is being valued so cheaply.

“I think it’s about the bottom line. That whole whiteboard scandal months ago [government pandemic planning revealed by Dominic Cummings], about “who do we not save”, really resonated, because obviously I’m one of the people not worth saving. ‘She’s 43, she’s had half her life, oh well never mind.’ That’s what we are to these people.”

Caroline condemned the dismissal of deaths among those with underlying health conditions, asking, “Why does that make any difference? Are their lives worth less because they’re vulnerable? It makes me so angry.” She raised the example of a friend who was told, “you’ve had your life now, so, basically, you’ve got to sacrifice that for your children to attend school. You can’t get much more cold-hearted than that... We’ve all had similar comments. It’s just horrific.”

Asked why she thought the government had insisted on the reopening of schools with no vaccines or safety measures in place, Caroline answered, “I wonder whether this is about money, and it’s cheaper to infect the child population than it is to do anything about that...”

“And I do wonder how much of that whole herd immunity argument is still standing. That’s what they wanted from the second this started. And despite all the evidence coming out that it’s not going to work, because of the nature of the virus.”

Referring to the hundreds of people still dying in Britain every week, Caroline said, “Those people mean something to someone, and should never have lost their life to something that’s entirely preventable. And I would love to achieve Zero Covid, but I’m under no illusions that this government has any intention of doing that.

“Fundamentally to me, life shouldn’t be valued cheaply. People have a right to life. That shouldn’t need to be written in any act, that people are allowed to live.”



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