

UK: National Education Union leader opposes school strikes in Twitter exchange with parents and teachers

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The National Education Union (NEU) has doubled down on its support for the Conservative government’s homicidal “stay in school” policy.

NEU joint leader Kevin Courtney engaged in a Twitter exchange with parents, including Lisa Diaz—who instigated the October 1 global school strike opposing sending children into unsafe schools—and members of his own union.

The exchange took place in an October 2 thread in which Courtney arrogantly dismissed calls for a ballot for industrial action against children’s and school workers’ lack of safety in schools during the ongoing pandemic.

Schools reopened in Britain from mid-August in Scotland, the end of August in Northern Ireland and from the start of September in England and Wales, with the full backing of the NEU. Getting children back in classrooms was critical to Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s reopening of the economy in July, with schools acting as holding pens for children so that their parents can go to work churning out profits for the corporations.

Reopening schools went ahead even though the Conservative government’s own advisers warned that schools would become vectors of transmission and contribute to a surge of COVID-19.

The virus is now infecting children at a more rapid rate than at any point in the pandemic. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for September show that 10 children lost their lives to COVID that month. Eleven children have died since the start of the school term in Britain. The deaths include 15-year-old Jorja Halliday and a girl aged under 14 in Wales, the youngest ever victim in that country.

Courtney posted a graph based on the weekly ONS Coronavirus Infection Survey. It showed infections rates rocketing among the School Year 2 to School Year 6 and School Year 7 to Year 11 groups of children. Courtney commented, “Covid cases in secondary schools in England are shooting up. So is education disruption.” The last of his six tweets asks, “Why doesn’t the DfE [Department for Education] act to reduce disruption?”

A concern with “education disruption”, i.e., anything that cuts across economic activity, places Courtney and the NEU

among the most determined opponents of all those demanding that children and teachers not suffer and die as COVID is allowed to become endemic.

Among those responding to Courtney’s thread and demanding that the NEU act immediately were members of the SafeEdforAll (Safe Education for All) campaigning Group.

Responding to Courtney’s initial post, Tariq asked, “Why are the unions not demanding industrial action? Inaction is not neutral.”

Courtney dismissively replied, “Well this is difficult. Strike action for how long? with what aim? What’s the leverage that will persuade the Govt to act? What proportion of members would support unpaid strike action for that long?”

Lisa Diaz responded:

“How long? Until schools are safe.

“What aim? Stop children and teachers dying and get sick (long term - both)

“What leverage blah blah? Bringing the system to a halt.

“Unpaid bit? No-they can still work remotely from home”.

Lisa ended her post by saying “And lastly Kevin” with a link to a newspaper’s report of Jorja Halliday’s tragic death.

Courtney did not reply to Diaz.

Tariq responded to Courtney’s question as to why anyone should be balloted to strike, writing, “The safety of our children, teachers, and their families and communities... isn’t reason enough?”

Courtney replied, “doesn’t engage with my questions”, before adding the insincere caveat, “Or are you talking about a protest strike?”

An NEU member, rikkewaldau, asked Courtney, “Why don’t the union protect their members and issue guidance with guarantee of legal protection? It feels like I am paying my [union] fees in vain. You should protect us and not just ask hypothetical questions.”

Another member wrote, “Why don’t you do something other than tweet & write letters!! It’s not making much difference is it?”

Others demanded, “Why don’t you ballot us?!” and asked, “What are you doing to keep your members safe from the

Pandemic.”

A mother asked, “Why don’t the unions act?? It’s not just about disruption—it’s about protecting the lives and health of children and staff. The unions could drive a change in policy today. How can you justify inaction in light of the tragedy below?”, posting another article reporting Jorja’s death.

One parent replied to Courtney, “Disruption? FGS this is our children’s lives and their health. This should be the priority. For families of students and of staff.”

Another respondent asked, “And just what are the unions doing, absolutely nothing as usual.”

Another tweeted, “WHERE are the unions in all of this? kids are DYING of #covid in the #uk (never mind #longcovid)...”

Someone else posted, “Kevin and Mary [Bousted, the NEU’s other joint leader]. There’s hundreds of educators dead. 10 children dead in Sep alone. Advise members to ignore harmful gov guidelines, as some are already doing...”

Faced with this angry response, Courtney could only bring himself to call for the use of masks in schools in England, stating that this would make them safer, citing the example of Scotland.

One respondent asked him, “Back in January, education unions were telling their members that it is unsafe to return to school under Section 44 and 100 of the Employment Rights Act 1996. Is it safe now in the eyes of the unions?”

The NEU abandoned its nominal support for concerned teachers exercising their legal rights by early March, with Bousted insisting that Section 44 and 100 were no longer applicable.

Courtney replied, “In January only a very tiny number we’re vaccinated, none double vaxxed. Schools were vectors of transmission (Boris Johnson’s words) into that unvaccinated population. The situation is clearly different now. But simple measures would reduce disruption to education.”

These are all lies to excuse ongoing mass infection in schools. Courtney’s statements are made as Department of Education figures published Tuesday showed an estimated 204,000 pupils in England—2.5 percent of the school population—were absent for a COVID-related reason on September 30. More than 100,000 pupils were off school last week with a confirmed COVID-19 infection. In secondary schools, one in seven or 13.7 percent of pupils were off school.

This represents a staggering 67 percent increase on DfE figures released just two weeks ago. The *Guardian* noted in a snippet on its live news feed, “The proportion of children at school has fallen below 90%—worse than this time a year ago—and the number off school for Covid-related reasons is up by 66%—204,000 off in total for Covid, compared with 122,000 two weeks ago when the last stats came out.”

So massive is the spread of COVID among the young that 1,000 children are now being hospitalised with the disease every month in England.

On Wednesday, overall COVID cases in Britain topped 8

million, with a further 233,058 cases recorded in the last week—the second highest weekly figure in the world behind the United States.

Workers, parents and students must draw the necessary lessons from the NEU and other unions’ backing for the government’s policy of social murder.

In May, Bousted declared, “Reopening schools is a question of logistics, not of risks.” At the start of the latest term, the NEU pledged to “do everything we can collectively to ensure that as many young people as possible continue to learn on site”.

These are organisations that act solely in defence of the profit system. Courtney asks in disgust, “What proportion of members would support unpaid strike action for that long?”

This comes from the head of the largest education union in Europe, with a membership of around 450,000. According to its annual accounts for the period to August 31, 2020, the NEU brought in over £51 million in dues from its membership and has a total income of over £55 million, including nearly £2 million in “investment income”. The accounts note that the NEU had cash at bank and in hand of over £21 million, up from almost £14.6 million the previous year.

Courtney does not want any of this money spent funding a strike to close unsafe schools when it can be spent on the ever more lavish requirements of the NEU’s top officials. Last year, the NEU paid out over £9.3 million to staff in remuneration and expenses, with almost £8 million of this in salaries and wages. Bousted received £152,377 and Courtney £143,528.

The hostility of Courtney and Bousted to any mobilisation of the collective strength of hundreds of thousands of teachers to close unsafe schools confirms the importance of the October 1 school strike, which won global support. Parents and concerned workers took matters into their own hands and kept their children off school for a day, not only independently of the unions but in opposition to their homicidal collusion with the Tories.

This is the way forward for workers everywhere. International rank-and-file action based on a scientific policy of eradication is the only way to end the pandemic.



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