

Education secretary threatens UK schools opposing scrapping mask-wearing, unions complicit

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Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi has announced plans to block schools and local areas continuing to implement mask mandates.

The government-ordered requirement for masks to be worn in secondary school classrooms, as a measure against the spread of COVID, was ended Thursday. Mask-wearing in indoor communal areas in primary and secondary schools and universities and colleges will end next Thursday.

Zahawi has now written a letter to MPs explaining that any headteachers who choose to maintain this most basic of defences against the pandemic will be contacted by the Department for Education (DfE) to explain themselves.

The letter warns, “I met with directors of public health yesterday and we agreed that in the event of extraordinary outbreaks of Covid in localised areas, they will share their plans with me where they are recommending reintroducing face coverings in tightly-focused geographical zones, so that we can assess evidence and data to ensure any extra measures are proportionate.”

It remains to be seen how the DfE will deal with those schools deemed to be taking “disproportionate” action. But Zahawi’s intervention is the latest in a series of vicious threats levelled against schools and parents for resisting the government’s policy of mass infection.

In December 2020, then education secretary Gavin Williamson threatened schools with legal action for trying to close a few days early at the end of term, amid a massive surge of cases among schoolchildren.

Throughout this year, threats of fines and even prison have been made against parents who have chosen to keep their children out of school due to the dangers posed by COVID-19.

This most recent act of intimidation comes in response to a wave of opposition among public health officials and

school workers against the government’s scrapping mask requirements. The *Telegraph* reported with outrage yesterday morning that over 100 schools had written to parents indicating their intention to maintain the use of face coverings in the classroom for a period.

Schools North East, a network of 1,150 schools, said 80 percent would be keeping masks in place. Case rates in the region are at 1,410 per 100,000. Most schools have more than 10 percent of staff and students absent for COVID-related reasons and a quarter have more than one in five staff off work.

In London, councils have taken similar action, drawing attention to dangerously low levels of vaccination in some communities. The capital’s 1.4 million children under 12, like the rest across the country, have not even been given the opportunity to be vaccinated. Infections among this primary school age group are at record levels according to data from the UK Health Security Agency—1,936 cases per 100,000 five to nine-year-olds in the week to 16 January, up 41 percent on the previous week.

Opposition to the government’s criminal policy finds no organised expression through the trade unions. The National Education Union (NEU) has said only, “The danger is we lift restrictions too quickly before the effects of returning to school are clear. This will result in more education disruption.”

Neither it nor the other education unions have even raised the possibility of action to protect school workers, children and their families. The NEU simply shrugs its shoulders and writes, “This disruption is at the door of the Government who should have got ventilation and filtration solutions in place before Omicron”.

They do not mention the danger to their members at all, only “education disruption”—more honestly, disruption to the government’s plans to use educators as child minders

in schools transformed into COVID incubators, freeing parents to produce profits for the corporations.

School workers are seething at the unions' complicity with the government, so that joint general secretary of the NEU Kevin Courtney cannot speak on any public platform without being subjected to a torrent of denunciations.

On the day the government announced the end of mask-wearing, Courtney tweeted, "Just talking with a parent; her son is in year 11 and had 6 lessons today. 5 were taken by supply staff. The level of disruption in education and for exam classes must not be ignored."

The responses were almost unanimously hostile. One teacher answered, "What about the fact that your members are regularly close contacts? This is not a mild disease. Many fellow, fully vaccinated educators are reporting feeling very unwell. Illnesses preventable & 100% due to there being no mitigations in primaries."

Another wrote, "Wouldn't have happened if unions had been strong to protect staff, sadly you accepted we will all get infected and we have, 6 weeks on & still can't breathe properly."

Dozens asked, "where's the actual action from the union", "what exactly are you going to do about it", "what are the unions doing to protect education, teachers and pupils", "will you be questioning the removal of masks in schools... how many of your union members have died of covid", "you are happy to take our money every months but what for" and "where the hell are the unions... there members are being made sick and disabled in unsafe working environments"?

NEU members felt "left high and dry", with "staff infected in droves" and "both staff and pupils dropping like flies". One "caught covid at the start of Xmas break and over 4 weeks later I still haven't been able to return to work as it has made me so sick."

Commenters demanded, "Do something about it then" and "Ballot us!", with one person pointing out that while "France are striking," in the UK, "There has been no voice, no ballot."

Several referred to the "complicit" union and "Complicit Kev", described as "one of them". One person added, "The unions, as usual, have failed us."

The next day Courtney posted, "Just talking to an NEU exec member. She says at her primary school '13 staff off with Covid - case rates in school 1 in 7 people are positive—staff in tears as they are so stressed. I am just hoping it gets better here soon'. This is profound disruption to education & learning."

Another flood of responses asked why the union was doing nothing and demanded action, with one commenting on the NEU's endless correspondence with the government, "You've written enough letters to sink a ship." Referring to the situation described by Courtney, a commenter insisted, "It's not a safe work environment for teaching staff and children alike. Shut the school down."

School workers "have been thrown to the wolves," wrote one person, whose point was proved by other responses. "I got Covid in Nov'20 in school, like several of my primary pupils. Long Covid for me, no support from union during phased return plus rigidity of sickness policy so no job now," wrote a teacher. Another, "Dismissed for ill health today after catching covid in school. It's disgusting nothing has been learnt in 22 months. My union representation says teachers aren't concerned so they haven't acted."

Condemning this terrible harm done to educators, others wrote, "You can see children and teachers being physically harmed, what are you doing to help them?", "It is not disruptive, it is cruel and horrid that public sector workers are treated in this way", "children are being hospitalised every day... pathetic, a teaching union that does nothing to protect staff."

The same sentiment is being expressed across the world, in the strikes and protests of educators, pupils and students in France, the United States, Canada, Austria and Greece.

Workers and young people internationally confront the same issue—the unions are an instrument for enforcing the ruling class's policy of mass infection, living with the virus and "endemic" COVID-19. While the likes of the NEU remain in the saddle, high levels of COVID infections, sickness and death will remain a reality. If a movement for an end to the pandemic is to take shape, it must be built independently of these hostile organisations.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties have helped to build a global network of rank-and-file committees through which the working class can organise this struggle. We call on all school workers in the UK to contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact