
As stress, workload and infection rates rise, we say:

“ If it’s not safe, call on your union to escalate! ”



WE'RE JUST A MONTH OR SO into the new school year but the summertime hopes that schools might be able to return to some kind of 'normality' seem a distant memory.

School staff are already exhausted by the constant stress of trying to keep children and colleagues safe, working in 'bubbles', managing both full classes and the demands to provide work for pupils self-isolating. Staff absence is increasing but schools are not being funded for the additional cover costs - let alone being funded to employ the additional staff that would enable smaller, safer, class sizes and reduced workload.

Staff are also working with the constant pressure of knowing that the risk of infection is always present. As infection rates rise, the risk to staff is getting worse too. As the NEU's new 'school covid map' website makes clear, too many staff are working in communities where those rates are dangerously high. For staff who are at higher risk, or live with those that are, the stress and pressure is greater still - yet few are being allowed to work from home as the NEU says they should.

Unlike most workers, school staff are being expected to work in an environment when adequate social distancing is just not possible - with 30 or more students and adults sharing the same classroom. We're told on the one hand that we shouldn't complain because children carry less of a risk (although global scientific debate is still far from agreed on that) but then we're told that it's students that are to blame for the spikes in university towns. But, just a few months ago, many of those same students were school-aged pupils!

Of course if, as the NEU's '5 tests' demanded, schools had access to regular testing, then staff would have the reassurance they need as to whether they are Covid-positive or not. Instead, test & trace is in chaos.

IT'S CLEAR THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS FAILING to act to control the virus, failing to protect the livelihoods and welfare of our communities, failing to protect the health and safety of school staff. If they won't act, then unions must!

The time has passed for just appealing to Government to 'do the right thing' and deliver on the NEU's '5 tests' for school safety. It's clear the Tories either don't know how to, or just simply aren't prepared to do so. It's time for unions to act themselves to protect health, safety and welfare - before things get even worse. The NEU's Special Conference on October 3rd was the opportunity to debate in detail what steps now need to be taken in schools but sadly - as the accompanying reports explain - that didn't happen. The Union should now be urgently calling meetings of reps to agree a clear plan of action, particularly in areas where high infection rates mean teaching full classes just can't be safe. School groups should also take the initiative themselves and ask for backing in taking action to protect safety and oppose unreasonable demands, as set out in the latest advice to reps on the NEU website.

IF YOU FEEL YOUR SAFETY AND WELFARE IS AT RISK

- **Meet as a union group to agree your demands for a safe workplace and seek negotiations with your Head/SLT.**
- **Contact your Branch to support you in escalating action - a ballot for strike action and, if needed, union backing for 'Section 44'.**

A report from NEU Special Conference

by Alex Moore, (first-time delegate from Plymouth NEU - in a personal capacity)

ON OCTOBER 3RD, I finally got to attend my NEU conference. Delayed and shortened to a one-day event on 'Zoom', it was not the same as a normal Annual Conference, but it was still a valuable experience for me and other delegates.

It was impressive to see at first hand the methods used to hold a Conference of over 550 Delegates representing nearly half a million educators. None of the Political Parties - the Tories most of all - could even dream of having so many members!

For a new delegate in particular, it was all a bit of a bewildering rush with emails, reports, agendas, forms to register if you wanted to speak and instructions on how to use the voting App. I was fortunate to have the invaluable help of other members of SPINED to help explain all the processes involved.

There was general agreement on two motions, along with some strengthening amendments, tabled by the National Executive (NEC) over "Winning in the Workplace" and "Building a Fair Education System". These included improving support for both supply teachers and workplace reps, and opposition to performance-related pay and the Government's intention of "restoring SATs and a largely unmodified examination system in 2021".

The main debates were over proposed Rule Changes contained in the Executive Report to Conference. Firstly, the NEC withdrew a proposal which would have allowed the General Secretaries to stay in Office beyond their 5-year term if they were retiring. I think they were aware that it would have been voted down as being a challenge to democracy in the Union.

A debate then took place over the leadership's proposal to reduce the size of the National Executive and, as a consequence, reserve more ... see over

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... report from NEU Special Conference

... seats for women.

Delegates from the Education Solidarity Network (ESN) - the left grouping within the Union that includes the Socialist Party - spoke in opposition to the move.

The ESN argued that this change would do nothing to make the NEC genuinely more representative, particularly of low-paid women working as Support Staff. It could also dilute lay democracy by making it harder for voices critical of the leadership to be elected. Although there was an overall 56% majority in favour, it did not meet the required 2/3rds majority needed to change the rules. That outcome may reflect the feeling amongst many reps that I discuss with that the Union has been operating in too 'top-down' a manner. Yes, we've had some impressive national Zoom webinars but there hasn't been enough open debate and dialogue about the action we need to take to defend members and education.

Sadly, that feeling will only have been strengthened by the way debate was curtailed on the Conference Motion which was of most immediate relevance to most NEU members - on 'Covid-19 and Safe Return'.

Given the growing crisis in the number of cases in schools since the start of term, the motion originally tabled by the NEC majority called, too vaguely, for "more detailed contingency plans for possible local or wider school closures by being clear about the infection/R rate thresholds at which schools/colleges in an area should close or move to smaller class sizes". However, amendments that called for

the Union to set clear thresholds for when this should happen were placed low down the order of debate by the Conference Business Committee. As a result, they were never voted upon.

Yet there was time to have this debate. The mover of the main motion had made it clear that amendment 1.4, to be moved by Socialist Party member, Jane Nellist from Coventry (see *right*), was not accepted by the Executive. This amendment set down clear thresholds and also added the call for action to protect staff at higher risk - which was absent from the Executive motion. Then, when the movers of the previous amendment 1.3 were unable to speak owing to a technical hitch, rather than move on to debate 1.4, a member of the NEC (and of the SWP) moved under Standing Orders to return to the substantive motion. This meant that 1.4, and other tabled amendments, were never discussed. Debate on this 'Covid-19 and Safe Return' was finished early when allocated Conference time was still available.

Amongst delegates from Districts using WhatsApp groups and other media to keep in touch with each other, there was widespread frustration and anger at the unfair way discussion was curtailed on such a critical issue.

In their pre-Conference video message, the Joint General Secretaries rightly called for reps' meetings to be held in high-rate areas to discuss exactly what steps needed to be taken. But the outcome of Special Conference still leaves school reps and Local Officers unclear as to exactly when the Union will back action to enforce smaller class sizes where local infection rates are dangerously high. That now needs urgently addressing.

We need an action policy to go with the NEU 'Covid Map'

by Jane Nellist, Coventry NEU

AT THE NEU SPECIAL CONFERENCE, I had been hoping to move an amendment on behalf of Coventry NEU - one first formulated by Socialist Party members - that sought to strengthen the Union's position on two key issues. Firstly, shielding the most vulnerable staff in our schools and colleges and, secondly, providing a clear policy on reducing the transmission of the virus, whilst still enabling the education of our pupils.

We have some of the largest class sizes and the smallest classrooms in Europe. Social distancing has been impossible to maintain in many schools. Cramped corridors and the lack of toilet facilities, windows that don't give sufficient ventilation as well as additional space add to the problems.

When schools were open to key workers and vulnerable families and even the wider reopening in the summer term, which was delayed in many schools through the work of NEU local reps and officers, schools could utilise space more creatively. Risk assessments could ensure that those most vulnerable staff could continue to work at home and social distancing and good hygiene control could be put in place. Most of all, smaller class sizes and discrete 'bubbles' of no more than 15 (8 in many classes in Coventry) provided more confidence to staff. That didn't come easy, as a union we had to mobilise our members.

The full reopening of schools in September was always going to create huge risks, especially without the '5 tests' firmly in place - especially the test and trace. With no 'Plan B' in place and no confidence in a government that was reeling from one disaster to another, it was a critical error on the part of the leadership not to stand firm, and make clear we would refuse to comply with a full return if necessary, unless the resources and a defined trigger for blended learning and reduced numbers were in place.

Government scientists have determined that for international travel, 20 cases in 100,000 triggers a 14-day quarantine, yet in Coventry the rate is currently 112/100,000 with all schools open!

Many schools have been resourceful, utilising space and ventilation to keep schools as safe as possible. However, others have been cavalier in their attitude to health and safety. Staff who are themselves more vulnerable to the virus or live with vulnerable family members have been forced to attend school or college. The Union must stand up and support those that want to work at home.

We do now have a Covid map which tells us how bad things are but what we have not got as a trade union is a policy of how to deal with the growing crisis.

With growing case numbers in schools for both staff and pupils, which in turn leads to a high number of pupils and staff isolating, we urgently need to make a stand. We want the education of our pupils to be paramount, but we are not prepared to put at risk the health and safety of staff, pupils and communities. We need to force the Government to act now.

Covid 19 will not be controlled by hope and good intentions; it needs a strong union that is ready to use all of its democratic power, including ballots for strike action.