

PAY FREEZE - COVID CHAOS

Words alone won't shift this Government - unions must build for industrial action



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As a big 'thank you' for all we've done in the pandemic, Rishi Sunak has decided on our reward - a 'pay freeze' - in reality a further pay cut.

(Martin Powell-Davies, Lancashire NEU)

This Government was only ever interested in keeping schools open for their own economic interests, not the children's. Not content with putting our personal safety at risk and expecting us to work even longer hours than usual, they now want us to foot the bill for their failures too.

The Government can't pretend that "we're all in this together" anymore. Contrast the way their corporate friends have been rewarded through billion-pound Covid contracts.

Nor should we accept that, just because private-sector employers are putting the boot into their employees, public-sector workers should share in the misery too. No, instead of a race to the bottom, public sector trade unions should give all workers a lead and demand a fully-funded pay increase for all. We must demand an end to the cuts that are undermining public services and also threatening more job losses too.

But the key question for the NEU and other public sector unions is, how do we answer this attack?

It can't be fought by just more petitions, or by school by school action. A national strategy is needed, and yes, that means building for collective action. If a clear lead is given, members will respond - but determined union leadership is key.

Socialist Party in Education proposes:

- **The NEU should immediately be getting in touch with the leaders of all the public sector unions to plan a joint campaign of action.**
- **Public sector unions should call nationwide socially distanced protests in the New Year, building towards the ballots for coordinated action that will be needed to defeat this robbery.**

Win regular mass testing in every area

The contradictory chaos at the heart of the Government's Covid policies has been brought into sharp focus by the sudden announcement that mass testing of secondary school students is going to be rushed out in parts of London, Essex and Kent.

There's no question that regular mass testing of school students and staff is needed. It's a demand that the NEU raised as one of our '5 tests' for Covid-safety in schools back in May.

A few weeks ago, infection rates in the North of England were much higher than in the South. However, it's now London where rates are rising fastest, particularly amongst school students.

Like some Tory 'King Canute', Matt Hancock hopes rushing out mobile testing units can stop the rising tide washing over London and the South-East. But, once again, instead of a properly resourced plan, he's resorting to half-baked measures.

The practicalities of making sure that schoolchildren in the targeted areas are all tested are far from straightforward. No doubt exhausted and overstretched school staff will again be expected to try and help bring some order to Tory chaos.

Ministers need to admit to what is now surely blindingly obvious. If school-aged children are so widely infected, insisting that parents send them in to classes of thirty in badly-ventilated classrooms inevitably means that schools will be acting as a significant driver of wider community transmission.

As parents and staff in the hard-hit North have understandably pointed out with anger, Government failure to organise widespread mass testing in other regions has already left both school staff and the families of the pupils they teach vulnerable. Children will have been returning home from school untested, probably without symptoms, but some still infectious.

But Government failure mustn't be allowed to stoke regional divisions. Regular mass testing of children should be happening in every area. The risk of transmission should also be being kept down through a properly resourced plan for safer reduced class sizes, with some children being supported to learn from home on a rota basis where necessary, certainly in those areas with the highest infection rates. Parents who are left without childcare should be paid in full if they have to remain at home as a result.

Of course, these demands aren't new. Instead of just pleading with Ministers who refuse to listen, what's needed is action to make sure they are forced to see sense. The NEU should follow the lead taken by the EIS teaching trade union in Glasgow and prepare members for ballots for strike action where employers continue to refuse to act to protect health and safety.

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