

Britain: Five Things we have Learnt from the National Education Union's Mobilisation to Keep Schools Safe

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Dave Kellaway highlights the lessons learnt from the recent government closure of English Schools.

1. Working people can collectively intervene and make a difference in the Covid-19 pandemic

Right up to the day before schools were due to reopen Johnson said that schools were safe. A day later, after the biggest online trade union meeting in history, with anything between 70 and 100 thousand participating, we saw Starmer shift his line to call for a national lockdown. Then Johnson executed yet another U-turn and shut the country down for six weeks. Indeed, this is the second or third time that teachers' action has forced the government to back down during the pandemic.

2. Starmer not so forensic, not so strong

Starmer's leadership has been exposed as a lot less strong and forensic than his cheerleaders in the press and Labour Party have claimed. It was only after the massive success of the NEU online meeting he called on Johnson to bring in a national lockdown. Even then he studiously, even forensically, avoided direct references to the teachers' mobilisation. He had consistently been more bullish than the Tories over the need to keep the schools open. His formulation, schools will 'necessarily have to close' was an attempt to write the concrete action of teachers and their unions out of the story. Indeed, it became laughable when he seemed to put the closure of zoos on some sort of equal footing with schools. Just look at the TV interview. Despite pointed questioning about what he would do about schools, he just kept going back to how national restrictions opened up that possibility. He refused to say clearly what Labour's position on opening primaries on Monday morning would be.

Starmer is reluctant to support working people taking action, in this case refusing to follow government rules or headteachers' directions, because he thinks that will weaken his effort to win the 'middle ground'. Actions that are not parliamentary or challenge the legal order in even the mildest way are not to be supported. His preferred framework is placing Labour's policies within 'the national interest' and securing a reputation for managerial competence. Most of the time the Tories will always own the 'national interest' and Starmer's hope that this will bring electoral victory is far from certain, outside of a Tory implosion.

3. Corbynism's legacy is alive and kicking

These events show the gains of the Corbyn project are far from exhausted. NEU leadership includes a strong contingent of pro-Corbyn supporters. A letter, organised by the Corbyn left, calling on Labour to support the teachers gathered support from across the party and the trade unions. Teachers and students were among the most numerous and enthusiastic supporters of Jeremy Corbyn. He was prominent in calling for support for the teachers and spoke on the campaign platforms. Pushing Starmer to take a stronger position will encourage, rather than demoralise, activists inside Labour who are organising against Starmer's witch hunt and the abandonment of his famous ten 'continuity' pledges.

4. Which working class?

Looking at what is happening rips up any narrow definition of the working class, limiting it to the so-called 'red wall' Brexit-voting industrial (often ex-industrial) working class. Do you make concessions to these groups over 'nationalism' and so-called traditional family values as Blue Labour supporters or Lexiteers like Paul Embery argue? Or do you build outwards from the progressive mobilisation of sectors like the teachers to win back the Labour Brexit switchers to progressive politics? Action by teachers in the red wall constituencies will have a positive influence on Labour voters who switched to the Tories, exposing how the government does not care about working people's health. Already some polls are suggesting that the Tories are losing support in such areas. Abandoning progressive policies in order to win a minority of Labour voters in these places is not only unprincipled but is not necessarily a winning formula. Such a Blue Labour line will lose support among the teachers or students mobilising today against the government.

5. Strong leadership and action build unions.

In the last few weeks, the NEU has gained 16,000 new members. It had already grown as a result of the strong line it took against the government last year. Just like the RMT, the rail and tube workers union, taking industrial action and campaigning builds support in a way that providing legal and other 'individual' services do not. The former left NUT (National Union of Teachers) leadership correctly pushed for unity with a smaller union to form the NEU and it has creatively used online methods to organise its activities. These national mass meetings on Zoom may have been a result of the pandemic, but the NEU have used them more effectively than anyone else.

Moreover, their leaders have welcomed and spoken on broader campaign forums which have supported teachers. Such campaigns have been initiated by left activists from inside and outside the Labour Party. Online meetings show the bosses, or the government, in this case, a sign of your support on the ground in real-time. This explains partly why both Starmer and Johnson had to shift their positions so quickly. It was inspiring to drop in on the online meeting and see how interactive it was. Teachers raised literally hundreds of pertinent questions about the action that were answered either by the platform speakers or other people on chat. Certainly, even when the pandemic is over this form of online organisation will continue.

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P.S.

- Anticapitalist Resistance. 5 January 2020:

<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/five-things-we-have-learnt-from-the-national-education-union-s-mobilisation-to-keep-schools-safe>

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