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Britain

# Safety fears over Covid in schools

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**Scottish teachers in three areas have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action over Covid safety fears.**

**Results of teacher ballots in three other Scottish council areas are awaited, while staff in the main support staff union in Glasgow are also being consulted over shutting schools. Meanwhile Labour councils in London boroughs have been prevented by the UK government in their call for early school closures amid a massive spike of Covid cases among young people across the capital.**

On 15 December, the main teachers' union in Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), announced the results of three consultative ballots on industrial action over safety concerns about Covid in schools. [1] In Glasgow, 93% of teachers voted in favour, on a turnout of 63%. In West Dunbartonshire, 91% of teachers backed the move to a dispute, on a turnout of 75%. In Fife, 90% of teachers voted in favour, on a turnout of 53%. Further ballots are ongoing in three other areas.

The Glasgow local association of the EIS had decided to consult members last week after the SNP-led council refused to undertake a shift to online and remote learning and to close to most pupils several days early and return late over the Xmas and Hogmanay break. [2]

Local EIS secretary, Susan Quinn, told the *Glasgow Times* that the union "had tried to work with the employer on ensuring safe workplaces" but wanted the City Council to extend Xmas holidays and outline their plans for remote and blended learning. According to the EIS, the Council had "refused on both accounts".

EIS General Secretary, Larry Flanagan, told Glasgow Live [3]:

The Scottish Government and local authorities seem determined to keep schools physically open, at all costs, right up to Christmas.

Scotland's teachers are clear that this will present a very real risk to their health, their pupils' health and the health of their families by increasing the risk of Covid-19 spreading through family festive gatherings.

The EIS union has a strong record of support for industrial action. In a result also announced on 15 December, FE (Further Education, post-secondary school) members of the EIS have voted to declare a national dispute with Colleges Scotland over the introduction of lower paid 'instructor' posts into vocational teaching in the 26 colleges across the country. [4] In recent years, EIS members in Scotland's FE colleges have undertaken strike action over pay that resulted in a significant victory. [5]

The Unison branch at Glasgow City Council, representing around 4,000 members working in schools in administrative or learning support roles, has also decided to consult school-based members on industrial action over Covid safety. [6]

The Scottish Green Party Parliament group has backed the Glasgow EIS decision to consult members on industrial action and its co-leader and Glasgow MSP, Patrick Harvie, declared that the Scottish Greens “will stand in solidarity with them [the EIS] if that happens”. [7] The left wing Scottish Green Party has 7 members on Glasgow City Council and 6 members of the Scottish Parliament, holding the balance of power in both bodies between the minority SNP leadership and the other UK unionist parties.

The Scottish Labour Party has previously been quick to raise concerns by the GMB union of its leader Richard Leonard against the SNP during the Covid pandemic, but has yet to declare support for the latest EIS and Unison concerns in Glasgow City, a council run by Labour for 40 years until it was ousted in elections in 2017.

The leadership of the UK Labour Party is supporting the position of both the UK Tory government and the SNP Scottish government of keeping schools open at all costs, even when some schools have two thirds of their students at home self-isolating or with COVID as well as large numbers of education staff off work. However, several local Labour councils in London, in Greenwich, Islington and Waltham Forest, had advised schools to move the majority of their teaching online for the rest of this term (and in Islington’s case at least the first week of next term).

Greenwich Council were issued with a legal threat – a ‘temporary continuity direction’ by England Education Secretary Gavin Williamson. Greenwich Labour council leader, Danny Thorpe, defended the decision to close but formally backed down in the face of the cost of fighting this move in the courts. Faced with the threat of legal action, Islington council has also backed down. [8]

Left wing Labour MP Richard Burgon [tweeted](#) that the hypocrisy of the Tories was exposed by the decision of Boris Johnson’s former school, Eton College, to close early last week and extend the Christmas break – “One rule for the rich. Another for everyone else!” The UK government’s actions in rolling back the powers of England’s local authorities during the pandemic, especially Labour ones, is part of a wider “Taking back control” agenda that aims to concentrate power in Whitehall and Downing Street, against local and devolved government.

Kevin Courtney, Joint general secretary of the largest teachers’ union in England & Wales – the National Education Union (NEU) – has also [publicly backed](#) the London local authorities closing schools.

Meanwhile the Welsh Labour government has already closed all schools and colleges from yesterday to stem the rising tide of Covid transmission amongst young people and the risk posed to teachers and other school staff.

## Labour battle over support for unions or governments

There is a battle inside the UK Labour Party about whether their allegiance is in supporting school students and workers over safety concerns, as demanded by trade unionists; or whether Labour backs Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon’s stubborn insistence on the continued opening of schools at all costs. In his quest for respectability from the Tory media, Keir Starmer has shown strong support for Johnson’s schools’ policy and this was reinforced in interviews on Monday by shadow cabinet member Rachel Reeves.

London Mayor and Labour stalwart Sadiq Khan originally seemed to be backing the science and communities urging early closure, but did a rapid u-turn saying that his comments were only meant to influence government – not London local authorities!

Labour Party members must instead demand that their party backs first and foremost the safety concerns of trade unions representing workers! Labour was created by trade unions and must back them.

# EIS prepared for widespread strikes over Covid safety fears

In November, two thirds of EIS members in schools across the whole of Scotland indicated in a union survey that they were willing to go on strike if schools are not closed down and move to online learning particularly those Scottish local government areas that are in the highest lockdown, Level 4. [\[9\]](#)

Eleven council areas in Scotland have just moved this weekend out of Level 4 restrictions, the most severe imposed anywhere in Britain, into Level 3, broadly similar to England's Tier 3. This affected nearly half of the Scottish population including the city of Glasgow and surrounding areas. Restrictions at Level 4 included the complete closure of all pubs, restaurants, cafes, hotels and other 'non-essential' retail. Travel restrictions apply in Scotland for both Level 3 and Level 4 local government areas and ban all non-essential travel into and out of the areas, even neighbouring ones.

Yet currently schools still remain open at Level 3 and Level 4 despite the wide spread of Covid-19 within the education system, resulting in thousands of students and teachers missing classes due to being in self-isolation or suffering from symptoms. [\[10\]](#) Front page headlines in the *Glasgow Times* during Level 4 reported "High School Pupils' fears over Covid threat" and "'Scared' students call for blended learning" (23 Nov). [\[11\]](#) The Scottish TUC (STUC) while giving support to the broad Scottish Government strategic framework of five Levels, nevertheless called for school closure to be automatic at Level 4. [\[12\]](#)

The fear among education trade unions is that with the UK wide governments' lifting of restrictions on household gatherings for five days across the Xmas period, there will be a massive 'third spike' of Covid in the new year particularly among young people returning to schools and risking the safety of thousands of school teachers and staff. Following the dangerous opening up of household mixing agreed by all the UK governments over Xmas, influential public health experts have called for revisions. A joint editorial by the British Medical Journal and Health Service Journal called the policy "rash" and stated it "will cost lives". Professor Linda Bauld of Edinburgh University has called the Xmas policy a "mistake" while Scottish government advisor Professor Devi Sridhar called for a rethink and the Welsh Labour government has also said there are now serious problems with the policy. [\[13\]](#) Keir Starmer has at least supported calls for a "review", though he has not said what he supports instead. A u-turn by the Johnson and/or devolved governments is not beyond the bounds of possibility as this article is published.

## Draconian laws against industrial action

The EIS consultation in Scotland gives a clear green light to the union leadership to call for strike action initially through the current six consultative ballots. But it will be very tricky to get official strikes due to the draconian restrictions on legal industrial action imposed by the Tory government. To get a legal strike requires postal ballots to get over 50% participation- during Xmas postal services, partial local lockdowns and the pandemic! The EIS may need to decide whether to ballot local authority area by area, or for the whole of the country, and any fully legal ballot process will not be able to be turned round before the Xmas break starts.

Despite the promise of a vaccine on the horizon, there is still a major concern that further restrictions and a move to

put some council areas back up to Level 4 will need to be imposed by the Scottish government in the New Year.

The Scottish government had reviewed the Xmas closure of schools last week and had decided not to extend it, in a decision strongly criticised by the EIS. [\[14\]](#)

## Examinations cancelled in Wales and Scotland

The Scottish government did however announce last week that it had decided to follow the Welsh government and cancel all secondary school examinations due in June 2021. The Scottish government had already cancelled all examinations for the National 5 qualification, but had been stubbornly insisting that exams taken mostly at the end of Secondary year 6 would still go ahead for the main school leaving and higher education entry 'Scottish Higher' and 'Advanced Higher' qualifications. The issue is obviously not the safety of those sitting exams next June, but the fact that so many students have missed so much school already, due to the prevalence of Covid particularly among the most disadvantaged working class populations such as in Glasgow. A move fully to teacher assessment of performance based on what students have been able to learn and achieve through School now gives the opportunity to prevent widespread bias and failure.

Nevertheless, the UK government has still insisted, albeit with cosmetic modifications, that examinations for GCSE and A level subjects will still go ahead in England. This is also seemingly a policy backed by the UK Labour Party leadership at Westminster.

## Battle for workers' rights

The moving of 10 million people in London and the south east of England into Tier 4 and the discovery of a new strain of the virus indicates the scale of the latest challenges and growth of the virus. The Scottish government moved three more council areas into their Level 3 restrictions, while lockdowns have been imposed in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

There is a battle in education across Britain to assert the fundamental rights of workers to safety from the massive increase of Covid transmission among young people. There is rightly concern that school students lose out if schools are closed. But keeping schools open in the current circumstances puts the lives of teachers and other school staff at risk. The solution is to step up the demand for more resources from governments, for schools to support the move to more online and remote learning, to minimise and rotate attendance, and to provide compensation funding for parents unable to work due to pupils having to stay at home (and unless the UK Treasury does this, the Welsh and Scottish governments will not have the necessary budgets to do this themselves).

Both the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party claim to support workers. It's time they both backed the education trade unions and begin to negotiate at local and government levels for an alternative to the Tories insistence that schools must remain open at all costs. When education trade unions decide to take action over the health and safety of their members, they must be supported by all in the trade union and labour movement.

*16 December 2020*

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Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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[1] EIS ["Teachers in three local authority areas back move to dispute over school safety"](#).

[2] EIS ["EIS Glasgow Ballots Members on Dispute with Employer"](#).

[3] GlasgowLive 13 December 2020 ["Teaching union threatens industrial action over coronavirus safety dispute"](#).

[4] EIS ["Scotland's College lecturers back industrial action to protect lecturer posts"](#).

[5] BBC News, 10 June 2019 ["College lecturers accept pay deal in EIS vote"](#).

[6] *Glasgow Evening Times*, 11 December 2020 ["Unison joins EIS in consultative ballot of staff over coronavirus safety"](#).

[7] *idem*

[8] *The Guardian*, 15 December 2020 ["Heads angry after two councils forced to back down over Covid school closures"](#).

[9] EIS November 2020 ["The Educational Institute of Scotland: School-based Member Survey Results"](#).

[10] *GlasgowLive*, 18 November 2020 ["Nearly 5,000 Glasgow pupils off school due to coronavirus"](#).

[11] *Glasgow Evening Times* 23 November ["Glasgow schoolkids don't 'feel safe' due to coronavirus"](#).

[12] STUC, 30 October 2020 ["The STUC has re-raised concerns with Scottish Government Ministers over a lack of safety restrictions at Level 4 covering schools and non-essential workplaces"](#).

[13] BBC News, 12 December 2020 ["Covid: Christmas five-day relaxation period 'a mistake'"](#).

[14] STV News, 3 December 2020 ["No change to school Christmas holidays in Scotland"](#), EIS ["Scottish Government Christmas Announcement Will Anger Many Teachers"](#).