

New York City finally closes public schools during coronavirus pandemic

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16 March 2020

After an unconscionable delay, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced on Sunday evening that New York City, the largest city in the United States, would close its public schools this week. According the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), students will not report to school on Monday and will remain out until April 20. Staff, however, will go into work on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to prepare distance learning lessons.

Public health experts and epidemiologists have advised federal, state and local governments for weeks now that the most significant action they could take to mitigate sickness and death from the coronavirus was to encourage social distancing by limiting large gatherings and closing down large public institutions such as schools.

On March 6, for example, Dr. Howard Markel, a specialist in the history of pandemics, wrote an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* headlined, “Coronavirus School Closings: Don’t Wait Until It’s Too late.” Referencing his study of the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu pandemic, Markel wrote, “School closing turned out to be one of the most effective firewalls against the spread of the pandemic; cities that acted fast, for lengthy periods, and included school closing ... saw the lowest death rates.”

However, as late as last Monday only 507 schools were closed in the US, roughly 0.4 percent of the total. With the rapid spread of the pandemic beginning to take hold in public consciousness over the past week, amid the complete absence of federal action, local and state officials were forced to carry out statewide and district closures en masse. As of this writing, 26 states have now closed all public schools, and a total of at least 56,000 schools have closed, affecting at least 29.5 million public school students.

New York City is a center of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. While thousands in the city are in quarantine and, as of Sunday, 269 people have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, these figures do not reflect the full scale of the pandemic, since testing is not widely available. Two people have died from the virus, but that

number is expected to increase substantially.

New York City has the country’s largest school district, with 1.1 million students in 1,900 schools. Cuomo also closed public schools on Long Island and in Westchester County, another center of the coronavirus outbreak, on a similar schedule. The incredibly long delay of school closures to these districts has undoubtedly magnified the spread of coronavirus throughout the region.

Until Sunday, authorities were adamant that the city schools would remain open. The last-minute announcement, giving parents and teachers only a few hours’ notice, reflected the incompetence and disorganization of the state and city governments. On Friday, Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio reiterated his commitment to this decision, stating: “We shut down the school system, we might not see it for the rest of the school year. We might not see the beginning of the new school year. And that weighs heavily on me.”

On Sunday, in a CNN interview, de Blasio noted that schools are where kids “get adult supervision, especially teenagers who would be out on the streets, there are health and safety ramifications to that.” When asked about contingency plans to feed vulnerable school children, he stated they are “far from perfect.” Clearly, de Blasio’s chief concern has not been feeding or housing the city’s most at-risk students, but rather preventing teenagers from taking to the streets in protest against the government’s criminal response to the pandemic.

An indication of the incompetence of the city’s response to the pandemic was the fact that John Shea, the head of the Department of Education’s Division of School Facilities, had notified school custodians only this weekend to disinfect school buildings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Over the weekend, however, several institutions and prominent figures reversed course. The UFT, which bargains on behalf of over 130,000 teachers, advised closing the schools only on Saturday. New York City’s public health care workers union, Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, on Sunday changed its previous position to keep the schools open. City Comptroller Scott

Stringer also called for closure. Figures such as UFT president Michael Mulgrew and New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson are now feigning anger at the situation, but what contributed to their about-face was the widespread opposition by teachers, parents and students to keeping the schools open.

In a *New York Times* Op-Ed on March 14, entitled “We are New York City Teachers. Close the Schools,” three teachers from the city’s top-rated school, Stuyvesant High School, wrote, “By coming to work we are being asked to put our health and our students’ health and the health of all of our families at unnecessary risk.”

As the weekend progressed, there were increasing numbers of calls on social media by teachers to conduct wildcat sickout strikes, as took place in Detroit in 2015-16 and Oakland in 2018-19, or force the UFT to call a strike. One teacher on twitter said, “We teachers have no choice but to fight to #CLOSENYCPUBLICSCHOOLS, and should no longer tolerate @NYCMayor and the ppl far away from the frontlines telling us at what cost! We know the cost more than anyone!” Another teacher on twitter said, “We can’t worry about the Taylor law. There’s no time. We have to act in the interest of public safety & save lives now.” The Taylor Law is the reactionary state legislation that bars public employees from striking.

Behind the political crisis lies the extreme unpreparedness of the city and the unions to deal with a health crisis of this magnitude, the decrepit state of public education, and the vast social inequality in New York City.

Over 70 percent of New York City public school students are poor and receive free lunches. Over 114,000 are homeless. For many, schools are the only venue where they can be assured of a meal or medical attention. In addition, many parents live on poverty wages, work two jobs and cannot afford day care. Decades of budget cuts have reduced the numbers of nurses. Already, there has been a likely spread of the coronavirus among children and teachers facilitated by large class sizes. Another significant motive behind Cuomo’s and de Blasio’s refusal to close the schools is the cost it will incur for the city, state, and possibly the federal government.

Before the school closures announcement, one public educator from a school in Queens with over 2,000 students, where one teacher has tested positive for the virus, spoke to the WSWS and exposed the criminality of the Mayor’s response. He declared, “de Blasio held a press conference at 5 pm on Friday afternoon. We had reported the case in our school at 11 am. He knew about it but didn’t say a word. They are lying and deliberately covering up the scale of the spread of the coronavirus in the schools. The UFT is only helping them. The union has been told about cases

throughout the city, but is covering them up, issuing tepid statements calling for schools to close, while urging teachers not to engage in strikes or organized sick-outs.”

It is significant that before closing the schools, Cuomo called on Trump to use the US military in the crisis. This move is in anticipation of the rising anger of the working class at the bipartisan policy of “malign neglect” that is the response of the capitalist class to this emergency. Indeed, wildcat strikes have already hit Italy, Britain and France in response to the inaction of employers in shutting down workplaces, while autoworkers in Windsor, Ontario walked off the job last week over concerns about the spread of coronavirus at their plant.

The response of the ruling class to the Covid-19 outbreak has exposed the sharp class divisions in society. Nowhere is this clearer than in New York, where schools are acting as contagion centers for the disease in the financial center and the most populous city in the country. Schools should have been closed as soon as the risk became apparent.

The demands for the immediate closure of all schools in New York City, and the indications that teachers were prepared to back up these demands with independent action, are significant. There is a growing understanding that, in the face of the incompetence and callousness of the authorities during a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic, workers must take matters into their own hands.

In the coming weeks, the concerns and anger of workers will undoubtedly deepen. Independent action by teachers and other workers needs to be accompanied by a broad set of social demands, however, such as the introduction of a free meals program for all school children who require it, free and sanitary housing for all homeless families and individuals in New York City, day care services for workers in essential industries with children, and full wages throughout the leave period. These demands dovetail with wider calls for mass testing, the roll-out of protective equipment and guarantees of adequate and equal care for all.



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