

”Obviously there has to be a revolt”

US teachers speak out on the coronavirus epidemic

Our reporters
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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread throughout the United States, nearly every school district in the country has been closed, affecting at least 55.1 million students. In most states, these closures will last through April, while other districts have already canceled the rest of their school years.

US public schools, which have suffered decades of budget cuts and privatization efforts, are potential centers for disease transmission. Large class sizes, under-equipped janitors, run-down facilities and a lack of school nurses combine to make schools significant vectors for disease transmission. But in many cases, such as New York City, the epicenter of the pandemic in the country, school districts resisted calls to close schools until teachers began organizing walkouts to prevent their schools from spreading the epidemic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with educators on the impact of the pandemic.

Back-to-work

As of this writing, the Centers for Disease Control has not established any clear guidelines for when schools should close and when they should reopen. Initial guidelines recommended short-term closures only at individual school sites if a case was discovered there. Although researchers are still determining the precise characteristics of COVID-19, young people can spread the disease without any obvious symptoms such as fever.

Without any science-based guidelines for when classes can safely resume, and without widespread testing to determine the extent of the epidemic, closures have been done on an ad hoc and local basis, while leaving teachers and students in the dark. Trump’s recent calls for a return to work by Easter raise the danger that school districts might re-open when millions of Americans are still infected.

Amy Ellevold, a middle school science teacher at Sweetwater Union High School District, where hundreds of teachers received pink slips this month, explained:

The district is not making their teachers feel at ease because they are not telling us anything other than to wait. It *does* hurt people to make them go back to work! Scientifically speaking it will take much longer than 15 days to deal with this virus. If someone gets it tomorrow, in 15 days they will still be sick. It doesn’t make sense because it will cause another spike in cases and we will have to do

it all again. I worry I am not going to see my students again, that’s hard for me but at the same time it’s better to be out a few more weeks or even months.

Katrina Brown, a Detroit science teacher who was victimized for exposing the presence of lead in drinking water at Detroit public schools in 2016, added:

I don’t think it’s correct to try to go back to work by Easter. According to the CDC a large spurt could happen in May or June. The government acts like it is helping people, but are they really? My first concern is the safety of the staff and the students. If we do have to return [before the end of the school year] there should be testing for everyone to make sure it is safe.

Sam, a veteran teacher in Michigan, expanded on the need for testing:

All they have to do is come up with 330 million tests, one for every American, and quarantine those who have it. Look at what South Korea did. They started testing and quarantining right away. They leveled out so that their health system could handle it right away.

Currently the rate of testing for the coronavirus in the US is abysmally low. In California, which is a center of the epidemic, only 1 in 2,000 people have been tested for the disease. Even people with symptoms are refused tests unless they require hospitalization.

Online learning

With no certain return dates, many districts have begun haphazardly demanding teachers immediately develop online curriculum for distance learning with almost no guidance. According to Amy:

I felt very resentful that the same day I had to drive down to the district office and turn in my Request for Hearing paperwork for

receiving my pink slip, I got an email talking about creating daily learning targets from the district, an email from our Teacher On Special Assignment (TOSA) saying they are working on possible guidelines for online curriculum, but there is nothing remotely concrete on what we should be doing. There's one science TOSA for the entire district of 42,000 students, and they've already cut her position for next year; she's not creating a curriculum for all 7-12 grade sciences. So I know it is going to be up to us to do it.

In Queens, part of the largest school district in the country (New York City Public Schools), an educator explained:

As far as how distance learning is working, so much is determined by the material conditions in the home, but also what type of school we are talking about. The larger, more factory-like schools are getting killed.

In many districts, students don't just depend on schools for technology but for much of their food. "One of the things everyone has to remember is we do so much more at schools than teach," said Sam. "Over 50% of the students in my district get free meals and if not for the schools, then what other government institution would do this?"

Economic fallout and budget cuts

After the outbreak of the coronavirus in the US, the stock market dropped 30 percent, but later rebounded on the announcement of \$6 trillion from the government and Federal Reserve to prop up Wall Street and the major corporations. The current bailout package passed by the legislature is focused almost entirely on guaranteeing the profits of corporations. As in 2008, this looting of society's resources will inevitably be accompanied by attacks on school budgets and teacher pay by both the Democrats and the Republicans. Sam in Michigan explained:

In the "relief" package they're giving loans to small businesses, bailouts to travel and hospitality industry, it's almost like the \$1,200 given to adults is to keep us happy in the short term. The Democratic Party does a lot of piecemeal measures to pacify us, and making us think we are "in the loop." \$1,200 times 250 million is about \$320 billion. They already gave Wall Street \$1.5 trillion. That's not really a lot proportionally from the \$2 trillion that is going for this stimulus bill.

The legislation includes only \$30.75 billion for the Department of Education, of which \$13.5 billion would be for emergency K-12 relief grants. This amounts to less than \$250 per student for schools to completely restructure the last three months of the school year into online learning.

The extensive cuts to education since 2008 have already worsened the epidemic, particularly in New York schools. According to the educator in Queens:

There has been no funding for extra custodial staff or allocation

of resources in the face of this crisis. But the broader context is that they have significantly reduced funding for maintenance in general. There are less full-time cleaners and kitchen staff. In our building, that has 2,000 people, the head custodian splits time between two sites. This has been the trend over the past four years.

Nationwide, there are still 135,000 fewer school employees than in 2008, despite public schools serving roughly a million more students since then.

The way forward

"The question I have about this entire situation," said Sam, "is what is the tipping point of capitalism shutting down?"

His sentiment was widespread:

"The problem is capitalism, the market," said Amy. "This is the most clear example of putting the market over people, it cannot get more blatant than this."

"The US has been trying to control half the world," said a New York teacher, Ben. "There was too much invested in ways to kill—weapons, tanks, planes—but how much is invested in health care? There is no preparedness and now the chickens have come home to roost."

Educators in the US have been at the forefront of a surge in working-class opposition across the globe. The 2018 wildcat statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona were followed by strikes and protests over much of the country throughout 2019. But in each case the unions fought to isolate the strikes and subordinate them to the Democratic Party.

"During the strike last year," said the veteran LA teacher, "the union brought in Mayor Garcetti and Eli Broad to 'help' with the negotiations. Up until then, Eli Broad was the bad guy, anti-union and champion of privatization and charter schools. Then we're told the mayor and Broad will help negotiate for the teachers.

"Every time our union hustles everybody to support the Democratic Party. Anytime there's an election, the union puts out its favorites, the entire slate of Democratic politicians. I think it's quite obvious their function in society.

"This year, after Biden started winning more states, we haven't even seen Bernie Sanders. He's doing the same thing he did four years ago, except now it's Biden instead of Clinton. Obviously there has to be a revolt, but it can't just be haphazard. I've been reading the WSWS because it has the best analysis out there."



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