

“It's the profit system at the root of these problems”

Teachers across the US discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on education. As of March 30, country-wide school closures have expanded to 184 countries, affecting over 1.5 billion students, or 87.6 percent of all enrolled learners, according to UNESCO.

In the US, the majority of schools have now been closed for two weeks, while statewide closures have been implemented everywhere except for Nebraska, Iowa and Maine. At present, seven states have shut down for the rest of the school year.

Despite warnings from the World Health Organization since January about the potential dangers of a COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration continually downplayed the threat of the virus and provided no guidance to school leaders, allowing it to spread undetected through schools, workplaces and communities.

In most districts, teachers have been forced to implement online learning in a thoroughly haphazard manner. Millions of students across the country lack internet access, further compounding inequities that have long existed in public education.

Faced with a deep-going economic recession, state governments have already begun to cut funding, with education budgets forecast to be slashed to the bone in the coming school year. States will utilize the rapid implementation of online learning during the pandemic to justify mass firings of teachers.

In the \$2 trillion corporate bailout passed last week, Congress granted Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a longstanding opponent of public education and advocate of child labor, the power to provide waivers to states for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the primary federal special education law. Many states, including Washington and Alabama, have already activated statutes allowing them to deny medical care to the mentally disabled, policies which also apply to children.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers across the US about the impact that the pandemic has had on their districts, and the broader political issues at hand.

New York City

George, a veteran high school teacher, told the WSWS, “The New York City problem is the worst in the country. De Blasio and [Governor] Cuomo kept the school system running for as long as possible. De Blasio and [Schools Chancellor] Carranza had no contingency plan. But no place got it right.”

He added, “I hope there will be a re-examination of how workers are treated. Civil servants are not here to be abused. There is no sick leave policy. I don't worry about budget cuts so much this year because it is already budgeted, but they could decide not to open for the next school year. This is a cash-strapped city in crisis. They may throw all the non-tenured teachers out and just have remote learning.”

Joe, an elementary teacher in the Bronx, said that this crisis “illuminates the class issues. Production is more important than workers' safety.” He denounced the bipartisan bailout of Wall Street, saying, “The stimulus package is not enough, it's just to put a bit of money in people's pockets in the short term, and most of the money is not going to them.”

Joe continued, “I agree that it's the profit system at the root of these problems, and that this needs to be solved not on a national level but internationally.”

A New York City school bus driver explained their situation in the crisis: “We, and the attendants, are not working as long as the schools are shut. I did receive my pay check but it is only 85 percent of full pay. Nobody knows how long they will be paying. We do not hear anything from the union besides a letter that said they anticipate schools opening April 20th, and that is too soon.

“Workers don't make the decisions. I listened to some of the WSWS Coronavirus forum Sunday. Is it possible for workers to do that, to become the ones writing the laws? I know that happened in the Russian Revolution.”

Las Vegas

Jazzmyne, a second-year substitute teacher in Las Vegas, Nevada, told the WSWWS, “It’s been really stressful because I’m not currently working and not contributing to our household income. I don’t want to use the term ‘laid off’ because that means we would be eligible to collect unemployment, which we’re not able to do since subs are expected to go back to work whenever school resumes. Right now my wife and I are concerned about being able to pay our mortgage, as she’s only working three days a week.”

Jazzmyne noted, “Our district has not handled the shutdown very well. Distance learning is an issue because roughly 120,000 students don’t have access to a computer or internet. Some teachers are becoming overwhelmed because principals are constantly coming up with new ideas and things to implement. CCSD [Clark County School District] has no real plan for distance learning and everyone is just winging it.

“The pandemic has really illuminated the issues that our society faces because of our capitalist economy. I think it is ridiculous that [Trump] wants to send people back to work [by the end of April]. I saw one of his tweets that said that the American people want to go back to work, which couldn’t be further from the truth. Shareholders want people to go back to work, not the workers themselves. Most people know how serious this epidemic is and we don’t want to go back to work to risk our health, and potentially our lives, for corporate gains.

“I think it’s amazing that workers are standing up for themselves. I think people don’t realize the power that they have until something forces us to take a stance. I’m part of a grassroots organization of substitute teachers in CCSD who are fighting for a livable wage and benefits. The fact that we have unexpectedly stopped working and have no health benefits has led to a lot of substitutes joining our cause. As of right now we are supposed to go back to school in a few weeks, but subs are concerned about going back to work and potentially being exposed to the virus and having no health benefits.”

Orlando

Laura, a first-year science teacher in Orlando, Florida, described the chaotic process of school closures in her district, saying, “Parents and students seem confused, upset, and stressed in my interactions with them. This is a big shift for most of our students, and an even bigger one for our parents, a large proportion of whom are challenged financially right now.”

Laura explained that many educators are only paid if they physically come to work. “Districts in Florida need to stop demanding employees physically report to work. They must pay them, with or without labor performed, because people deserve to live without having to work for the ‘privilege’ of

being alive. Pay everyone who was employed at the time the WHO officially named it a pandemic. Pay them as they would normally have been paid for their average amount of work in a month or two-long period, let them go home, and be done with it until it’s safe to gather in workplaces again.

“Health has been wrested away from people, their own livelihoods sold to them for a profit. It is abhorrent. It pains me. Healthcare will always be accessible to those who can afford it, and that is a bleak and horrible thought.”

Oakland

Shane, a teacher in Oakland, California for over 20 years, criticized the response of the Trump administration to the pandemic. “He is also the clown that the ruling class gets to blame for everything they’ve always wanted to do. They already kill hundreds of thousands of workers every year through their illegal wars, killer cops, lack of healthcare, extraction industries, and more. What’s a million to ten million more to the US ruling class? They are already finding a myriad of ways to profit off this global pandemic. The \$2 trillion bailout will be but one of many bailouts coming in the next five years. It’s socialism for the ruling class, and Darwinism for the working class.”

Shane pointed to the refusal of the government in Australia to shut down public schools, calling it “entirely unnecessary. All school campuses should be closed until the healthcare system of each country is adequately prepared to treat coronavirus patients. The world needs a Marxist response to this pandemic, global production based on the material needs of survival. We have already seen the utter failing of the neo-liberal response. Autoworkers, teachers, nurses, you name it, must keep matters in their hands, and set the conditions for returning to work.”

Shane said that going forward, “what is desperately needed is a general strike based in and carried out by the international working class. Great lessons can be learned from this economic shutdown.” Socialists, he added, “need to expand our reach and relevance amongst the workers that circulate capital—port workers, warehouse workers, transportation workers, etc.”



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