

US teachers union provides political cover to Trump's demand for the reopening of schools

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The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities” on April 29 in line with the demands of Wall Street and the Trump administration to reopen business. This initiative in the midst of the crisis amounts to the unions’ indispensable assistance in the government’s policy of forcing people to choose between returning to work at the risk of their lives or facing destitution.

Hundreds of walkouts and protests by teachers and other workers are occurring around the world against the premature return to work. Many are beginning to draw profound conclusions on the nature of capitalism, which is imposing increasingly fascist policies such as “herd immunity” and the normalization of mass death.

“A Plan to Safely Reopen” proffers the union’s hand to the Trump administration’s back-to-work policy, which scientists warn will lead to tens, if not hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths. The AFT’s announcement follows Democratic Party presumptive nominee for president Joe Biden’s nearly identically-named column, “My Plan to Safely Reopen America,” in which he aligned himself with the fully bipartisan back-to-work bandwagon.

The union’s 20-page report dutifully “focuses on reopening school buildings” so that “parents, who work outside the home, can go to work.” “That is the key to the reopening of the broader economy,” they note.

The AFT’s plan centers on “five pillars.” The first calls for maintaining physical distancing until there are 14 consecutive days of declining COVID-positive cases, an endorsement of the official Trump administration policy. Every state currently opening businesses under Trump’s Phase 1 of “Opening Up America” has ignored this toothless two-week mandate.

Then the union calls for a series of measures, which the organization knows full well will never be funded. These include: “ramping up the capacity to test, trace and isolate each and every new case”; the deployment of “somewhere between 100,000 and 250,000 contact tracers”; reducing class sizes to 12-15 students to ensure physical distancing; adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for educators, nurses and staff; daily sanitizing of all schools; hand-washing stations upon entry at schools; additional medical and mental health staffing; and wrap-around services through a community schools model.

When AFT President Randi Weingarten was asked by Politico what the unions would do if schools were reopened without the prescribed safety measures, she replied, “you scream bloody

murder ... and you do everything you can ... to use your public megaphones.” National Education Association (NEA) President Lily Eskelsen Garcia went a tad further, saying she would not “rule out” strikes. “You put all things on the table when it comes to student safety,” Eskelsen Garcia proclaimed.

While the unions rhetorically “scream” and “put things on the table,” they are, in reality, plotting with federal and state administrations to force educators back to school no matter how unsafe. The AFT and NEA will not lift a finger to defend teachers and students, much less the population as a whole, in the face of the ruling class’ homicidal policy.

When Wall Street calls, Weingarten et al. are certain to answer. Making over a half a million dollars a year herself, the AFT president is regularly listed among the top power players among Wall Street institutional investors. According to a 2016 report in the *Wall Street Journal*, Weingarten calls the shots in over \$1 trillion in pension fund investments. To be perfectly candid, the amount of money the union paid out in pension benefits would be sharply reduced if a large number of older teachers died due to exposure to the deadly virus.

The union is not a workers’ organization but a business that rightly fears the growing anger of educators. As the *New York Times* bluntly put the quandary faced by the AFT and NEA, “Forcing educators to work at a perceived risk to their own health could be not only a public health danger but also a recipe for labor unrest...” Weingarten likewise said the union executives advocated “proceeding in a safe and coordinated way” so that “people feel that they’re all in.”

Under Trump’s three-phase plan, the federal government has recommended that schools reopen in “Phase 2.” No state has scheduled a school reopening this academic year, although Idaho said local districts could, if they so choose, and Maryland had not officially announced its final decision. Nevertheless, there are calls in various states for summer “remedial work” with in-person classes. The AFT goes so far as to advocate, “A voluntary multiweek summer session” for “enrichment and ‘catch-up’ time.”

Among the most important lessons of the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic was that closing schools early and longer was “one of the most effective firewalls against the spread of the pandemic.” Dr. Howard Markel, a specialist in the history of pandemics, emphasized this point to the *New York Times*, warning that, “cities that acted fast, for lengthy periods, and included school closing ...

saw the lowest death rates.”

In other words, reopening schools without adequate protective measures virtually guarantees a comprehensive community spread, posing a catastrophic threat to the population. Making an explicit warning against “an unlimited re-opening of schools” at present, a team of German researchers has published a study whose data suggests “that viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults. ... Children may be as infectious as adults.”

Additionally, teachers are particularly at risk. As *Education Week* reported, with 29 percent aged 50 and older and many with underlying health conditions, about one-third of teachers are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Teachers’ workplaces also rank among the “germiest” of all professions, noted a recent study, with 27 times more germs on computer keyboards than others.

Finally, despite the claims that children are relatively unscathed by the virus, some have died. Further, a new, highly dangerous inflammatory condition that afflicts young COVID patients indicates that there is still much scientists do not know about the disease, including its long-term implications.

But the central aim of the AFT and NEA has nothing to do with protecting teachers, school workers, or students and everything to do with maintaining their dues stream and government-anointed role as labor contractors. The AFT plan misses no opportunity to emphasize the need for the union to be intimately consulted and involved. “Now is the time for unions and employers to work on all issues for returning to school,” they say, asking to be included in decisions on “programming, space, operations, logistics, calendar, and aligning all the public health interventions.”

An entire section is labeled “A Seat at the Table.” The AFT states, “Our commonsense approach requires real partnerships with employers and community stakeholders on state and local levels. School districts, universities, and hospitals should look to unions and the collective bargaining process as opportunities to provide genuine participation, communication and buy-in from the workers ultimately responsible for ensuring the health and safety of our students, patients and those we serve.”

Collective bargaining, they reiterate, is “an opportunity to solve problems facing school districts, universities and hospitals as they plan for and manage reopening...” For educators, decades of this type of “collective bargaining” in which they had no input or impact has meant disaster. Rotten deals, betrayed strikes and secret negotiations brokered by the AFT have created conditions where teachers are working in decaying, unsanitary schools, students learn in buildings without safe drinking water, there is a widespread lack of nurses, librarians and support staff, and impoverished educators are buying supplies with their own resources. A return to work under the supervision of the AFT will mean death and suffering.

However, the AFT is speaking not to educators here, but to the ruling elites. The clear subtext is: “You can count on the union to suppress struggles to the best of our ability, as we have been doing for decades.” Further, it is warning, “Without us, you may not be able to keep teachers, nurses and other public employees under control—especially with their very lives at stake.”

Over the last two years, more than 700,000 teachers and other school employees went on strike against the austerity program of both big business parties, which will be drastically escalated in the wake of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. This will pit teachers in even sharper conflict with the AFT and NEA, which are critical pillars of the Democratic Party.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers, students and workers to reject the outright surrender being callously plotted by the unions. Instead, drawing the lessons of the nature of the pro-capitalist unions, workers must begin the formation of new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood. These organizations should base their demands not on what capitalism says is affordable, but on what is necessary.

When and how schools should be reopened must be determined by these rank-and-file safety committees of educators, parents and neighborhood residents in consultation with medical experts. There must be no return to schools, factories or workplaces without safety precautions as guaranteed with independent scientific appraisal. The working class must demand that governments make available the resources required to contain the spread of the disease, treat and care for those who are infected, and secure the livelihoods of the hundreds of millions of people who will be affected by the economic fallout.

The resources exist to achieve what is necessary: universal testing, free high quality health care, nurses in every school, and the rebuilding of public education infrastructure and more, but these trillions are monopolized by a criminal oligarchy, which is willing to drive society into the abyss in order to defend its wealth and privileges. The priority has not been saving lives, but saving profits. It is this that has prevented any scientific, rational and globally coordinated response to the pandemic.

The alternative to capitalism is socialism—the restructuring of social and economic life, on a world scale, to meet social need, not private profit. The fortunes of the super-rich must be seized and redirected toward combating the pandemic and addressing urgent social needs. This means the fight for socialism. We urge all those who agree with this perspective to make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party today.



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