

With support from the teacher unions, Trump demands the unsafe reopening of schools “ASAP”

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In a late-night tweet on Sunday, US President Donald Trump declared, “Schools in our country should be opened ASAP. Much very good information now available. @SteveHiltonx @FoxNews” Trump was referencing a monologue earlier in the day by the extreme right-wing Fox News commentator Steve Hilton.

Speaking on his program *The Next Revolution*, Hilton declared that “there won’t be a recovery” in the US “unless we reopen schools now.” He went on to describe temperature checks as “unscientific nonsense” and “totally pointless,” while calling social distancing rules “over-prescriptive” and “arbitrary.”

Referencing Kari Stefansson, the CEO of Icelandic company deCODE genetics, Hilton added that children were not at risk and, moreover, were “less likely to transmit the disease to others than adults.” His first assertion has been tragically refuted by the emergence of the Kawasaki-like multi-organ inflammatory syndrome. The second is unproven and has been challenged by scientific studies. Nevertheless, the dangerous proposition is being used to justify the reopening of schools in many European countries.

Trump seized on Hilton’s remarks because the reopening of schools is critical for big business to ramp up a return to work throughout the country, despite its immense dangers. Eighty-billion dollars a day are being funneled by the Federal Reserve into the paper assets of the financial elite; these dollars represent claims on value that must be made good through the labor of millions. While educators represent a substantial workforce in themselves (3.7 million teachers, 1.6 million college faculty, and at least 2 million support workers), tens of millions more cannot return to their workplaces without sending their children to school.

The Democratic Party and presumptive presidential candidate Joe Biden concur. Biden recently went out of his way to attack Trump for “hampering” the return to work. The very first schools to reopen this month were under Montana’s Democratic Governor Steve Bullock. California’s Governor Gavin Newsom has suggested summer school may open in July. From Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan to Andrew Cuomo of New York, Democratic governors are overseeing the deadly restart of industry and commerce across the US.

The president’s demand for the reopening of schools was also followed on Tuesday by a statement—different in tone, but analogous in message—from American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten.

Opposing those who say that it is premature to reopen schools in the fall, Weingarten put a pseudo-scientific spin on it, suggesting “voluntary summer school” over the next few months would provide

an “opportunity to test-drive best practices.” The union executive noted that “reopening schools is a key part of overall reopening,” while admitting that “absent a vaccine, no one knows what the future will bring.” She again appealed for schools to partner with the AFT in the process and, concurring with Trump’s reckless timeline, concluded, “That starts this summer.”

The prevailing attitude of parents is strikingly different. A recent *USA Today* /Ipsos poll shows that in the event of their schools reopening, a majority of parents, 59 percent of respondents, said they were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to protect their children and families by keeping youngsters at home. Parents would opt for online learning or some form of home schooling, they said. Seven out of 10 said their children would struggle with social distancing at school.

Other polls concur. A Politico/Morning Consult poll published last week found 41 percent of Americans said it was a bad idea to reopen schools this fall, while about one-third thought it was a good idea. As for teachers, 18 percent said it would be likely they would not return to schools reopening in the fall, a statistic that rises to 25 percent for those over 55.

Where schools have reopened in Europe, there has been a rapid spread of the pandemic, sparking outrage. In France, two weeks after the reopening on May 11, more than 70 schools have been forced to re-close after positive tests for COVID-19 emerged among both students and teachers. Primary and day-care centers have opened in Saxony, Germany, with virtually no precautionary measures, prompting a storm of protest.

Public health experts continue to sound the alarm on the dangers facing children as well as their potential role as vectors for community spread. Seattle Children’s Hospital infectious disease expert Dr. Danielle Zerr rebutted the claims of Stefansson and deCODE, telling Vox, “What we don’t know yet is the degree to which children can transmit the virus.”

Leading German virologist Christian Drosten conducted a study that found similar viral load across age groups. He and his colleagues concluded, “We have to caution against an unlimited reopening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation, with a widely susceptible population and the necessity to keep transmission rates low.” He emphasized, “Children may be as infectious as adults.”

The entire process of reopening schools in the US is patched together, chaotic, and unfunded. It will inevitably create new breeding grounds for the virus in every community across the country with incalculable consequences.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), under direct

pressure from the Trump administration, has sent contradictory and mealy-mouthed messages. Its first set of recommendations was suppressed by the White House, then amended and reissued. The resulting “guidances” take no federal responsibility, delegating decision-making and implementation to states and local school administrators.

The CDC document is filled with weasel-words. “Schools *may consider* implementing several strategies to encourage behaviors that reduce the spread of COVID-19 [emphasis added],” it states, making life-and-death public health directives a choice, not a mandate.

On the most critical question—what schools should do when people get the virus—they are advised to “*actively encourage* employees and students who are sick or who have recently had close contact with a person with COVID-19 to stay home.” This amounts to the complete absence of precautions and the full-on adoption of “herd immunity.” The point is underscored when the CDC suggests the wearing of face masks “if feasible.”

Upon reading this document, one would have no inkling that we are living through a highly infectious pandemic, the likes of which the world has not seen in 100 years, that has cost the lives of more than 360,000 people globally, including over 103,000 Americans.

Schools have already pointed out the prohibitive cost of buying face masks alone, much less all the other necessary requirements for protecting students. Across the US, public schools are facing budget cuts of up to 30 percent, as states reel from the economic downturn. One Learning Policy Institute analyst estimates that there would need to be an infusion of \$41 billion *more* across the US to roll out remote learning, expand food service for a growing number of low-income students, and extend the school year to make up for lost days. There is no “guidance” as to how schools should accomplish these measures with substantially *less* funding. The CDC notes that social distancing requires spacing desks at least six feet apart. This measure obviously entails much smaller class sizes—a demand teachers have fought for over decades and been rebuffed at every turn. This policy alone, a critical one, would require hiring tens of thousands of educators under conditions when it is estimated that at least 275,000 stand to lose their jobs due to budget cuts.

The guidelines also include a series of high hurdles for any district and an impossibility for many, including: “adequate supplies including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol, paper towels, tissues, disinfectant wipes, cloth face coverings (as feasible) and no-touch/foot-pedal trash cans,” the installation of “physical barriers, such as sneeze guards and partitions,” the establishment of isolation areas in every school, staggered scheduling and more.

Regarding transportation, news aggregator *Education Dive* points out, “Limiting the number of students on a bus to maintain distance could mean increasing the number of buses, drivers and routes, which many districts can’t afford. This could be even less practical considering a nationwide bus driver shortage, and that drivers in many cases have pre-existing conditions or are in an age range more susceptible to coronavirus.”

As to the all-important issues of mass testing, isolating and contact tracing, Brett Giroir, assistant secretary for health in the Department of Health and Human Services, claimed, “It is certainly possible to test all of the students.” However, he said, “it is much more likely” that a “surveillance strategy” would be used with random testing, or perhaps testing the school’s sewage. None of the Trump administration’s projected claims for mass testing have occurred as the government abandons any effort to check the spread of

COVID-19. As for the attempts to put in place the tens of thousands of necessary contact tracers, ABC News reports that an effort began about a week ago, long after the pandemic took root across the country.

Reopening schools under these conditions means mass deaths and suffering will escalate. The unions, both the AFT and the National Education Association, are well aware that the ruling elites have no intention of funding any essential measures. They are highly paid accomplices in the drive to reopen schools and force workers back on the job.

No doubt, educators are worried about their students losing substantial ground in their education. Many young people are also hungry, deprived of the myriad supports that schools provide, and cut off from their social network. The choice, however, is not between simply opening and closing.

The real issue is making the safety and welfare of students, their families and workers primary. The rethinking of public education must be driven by science, not money. The vast resources of society must be made available to defeat the virus and provide all necessary supports to the working population and their children. It is the profit system that stands at every point as a barrier to a rational and scientific solution.

The unions’ open alliance with Wall Street’s demand for a reopening of schools under conditions where there is no vaccine, no real treatment, and the pandemic continues to spread, is a socially criminal act. The unions have demonstrated that there is no bridge they won’t cross in defense of capitalism.

The *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* calls on educators to immediately form rank-and-file safety committees of educators, students and parents in every school and neighborhood, to determine under what conditions and when schools reopen. No expense can be spared in provisions for the safety of children and communities. The fortunes of Wall Street, extracted from the labor of the working class, must be expropriated and devoted to fighting the pandemic and reorganizing society along socialist lines, placing social needs above private profit. All educators interested in fighting for this perspective should sign up for our newsletter, follow us on Facebook, and contact us today at teachers@wsws.org.



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