

Trump's back-to-work diktat threatens teachers' lives

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On Wednesday, US President Donald Trump demanded that US schools reopen in the fall amid a raging pandemic, threatening the lives of thousands of teachers.

The move to rapidly reopen schools, which is taking place globally, is a strategic imperative for the ruling class in its homicidal drive to force workers back on the job amid the deepening COVID-19 pandemic. If students are not back in school, their parents will not be able to go back to producing profits for the ruling class.

Trump's campaign to reopen schools escalated Monday, when he tweeted, "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!" On the same day, the Florida Department of Education issued an emergency order requiring all schools to reopen in August, to facilitate "a return to Florida hitting its full economic stride." The following day, the topic of reopening schools dominated multiple meetings at the White House, as well as an online call with governors from every state.

On Wednesday, hours before the White House Coronavirus Task Force held one of its rare press conferences, Trump tweeted, "In Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and many other countries, SCHOOLS ARE OPEN WITH NO PROBLEMS," adding, "May cut off funding if not open!" He issued another tweet denouncing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for its supposedly "very tough & expensive guidelines for opening schools."

Under pressure from Trump, the CDC announced that its guidelines for reopening schools would be scrapped and replaced next week with less restrictive recommendations. CDC Director Robert Redfield provided the pseudoscientific justification for reopening schools, stating, "We really don't have evidence that children are driving the transmission cycle of this."

No credence can be given to this statement, made under open and public duress from the White House. In one recent study by researchers from Geneva University

Hospitals and the University of Geneva, the vast majority of children who tested positive for COVID-19 carried the same amount of virus as adults, indicating that they serve as transmitters. The claims by Trump and Pence are only the latest in a string of lies aimed at justifying the end of all restrictions on the spread of the coronavirus.

In March, Trump asserted that "young people, people of good health, and groups of people, just are not strongly affected" by the virus. This was immediately contradicted by Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Multiple teenagers died as early as April, and cases of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) became more prevalent.

Available data from the New York City Health Department shows that in a city with widespread community transmission, the mortality rate for children ages 10-19 is 0.2 percent, meaning the potential death toll for school-age children could be in the tens of thousands.

The potential dangers facing millions of teachers and other educators—nearly 30 percent of whom are 50 and older and thus at a much higher risk of dying from COVID-19—were dismissed by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who on Tuesday accused teachers of "making excuses" in an interview on Fox News.

As with each section of the working class, there has been no official tracking of the number of deaths of educators, but a list compiled by *Ed Week* documents over 200 that have died from the virus.

The rush to reopen schools is bound up with the decades-long assault on public education. The ruling class sees the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to get rid of older, higher-paid teachers by placing them in a situation where they must choose to retire early or risk death. If educators die, this is seen by the ruling class as a positive good, as it means another pension will not have to be paid.

The drive to reopen schools is guided not by science, but by the profit interests of the financial elite. As with

the broader population, there will be no universal testing of educators and students, or anywhere near the level of contact tracing required to contain the spread of the virus.

Despite the claims of Pence and other officials, there is broad hostility among educators to the reopening of schools, with a recent survey finding that 65 percent are opposed to the push to reopen. This opposition finds no expression in official politics, however, as Democrats at every level have collaborated with Trump in the back-to-work campaign.

Comparable to the role played by the United Auto Workers (UAW) in helping to restart auto production, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates, are now working closely with the political establishment to enforce the reopening of schools.

Before the pandemic, teachers and education workers spearheaded the resurgence of class struggle in the US, beginning with the 2018 wildcat strike by West Virginia teachers. Since then, over 700,000 educators in over a dozen states have gone on strike, while hundreds of thousands more around the world have also struck to oppose similar attacks on public education. The mass closure of schools in mid-March took place only due to the opposition of educators, who were increasingly organizing independently of the unions, which sought to enforce the continuation of in-person instruction.

The attacks on teachers being carried out by the Trump administration is an attack on the entire working class. To carry out a genuine struggle, educators, parents and students must take matters into their own hands by forming a network of independent, rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood.

These committees should link up with autoworkers who have formed safety committees in the plants and fight to unify the entire working class to halt nonessential production, prevent the unsafe reopening of schools, and implement policies to contain and defeat the pandemic.

The following demands should be discussed and popularized by teachers and parents:

- **No reopening of schools until conditions are safe**, as determined by local rank-and-file committees in conjunction with scientists and public health workers. Where districts force the reopening of schools, universal testing and contact tracing, as well as personal protective equipment, must be provided to every educator and student. Any educator who chooses not to return for safety and health reasons must be provided with full pay and benefits, and allowed to teach remotely.

- **A vast expansion of funding for education.** All cuts that have been implemented must be reversed, and hundreds of billions diverted from propping up Wall Street to fully fund public education. Every household must be provided with high quality computers and high-speed internet access to facilitate online learning. Academic, physical and emotional support for students must be provided through a dramatic increase in school counselors, nurses, arts programs, special education staff, vocational programs and English-language learning made available both online and in-person in a safe manner.

- **The modernization of all schools.** Dilapidated school buildings must be rehabilitated or rebuilt for 21st-century learning, health and safety. A massive program of construction and infrastructure development is necessary, in line with the recommendations of health experts.

The struggles of educators must be connected to the fight of the entire working class against the homicidal back-to-work campaign, which is driven by the demand of the financial oligarchy that workers sacrifice their lives to pay for the trillions of dollars handed out to Wall Street.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its May 21 statement, “Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!”: “The SEP insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to a struggle of workers against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a fight against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.”

The SEP and the WSWs will provide all the assistance it can to teachers who want to establish rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all workers to study our program and make the decision to join the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact