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Teachers speak out against Trump’s push to reopen schools

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two teachers about the dangerous push by the Trump administration and the entire political establishment to reopen schools in the fall with minimal safety measures in place and as the COVID-19 pandemic spirals out of control across the US.

Ricardo, an elementary school teacher of 24 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), said, “I strongly disagree with Trump’s rush to reopen schools. Although Trump claims to be concerned with student learning, I believe he is more concerned with his reelection prospects. He knows that once students are back in school, their parents can get back to work.

“The decision to reopen schools shouldn’t be political. It should be made by medical experts. A rush to open schools could lead to a rush to close them when students, teachers and staff become infected with COVID-19 just like it happened to states that prematurely opened up their economies.”

Referring to the oft-repeated lie from politicians of both parties that there is no money to adequately address the pandemic and education, Ricardo said: “There’s money for the corporations, banks and war. But there’s no money to retool all the schools, and they’re not going to allot money for this. And Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is saying if the school districts get any money, that money has to also go to private and charter schools.”

Current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines on social distancing in schools are for desks to be spaced 6 feet apart when feasible. The guidelines, which CDC Director Robert Redfield has made clear are “recommendations” and not “requirements,” are unfunded and will be modified over the coming week in accordance with the demands of Trump. The current guidelines state that students should be assigned to small groups throughout the day, which would logically necessitate the closing of cafeterias and the serving of meals in classrooms.

“Technically our classrooms are not dining rooms,” Ricardo said. “Now they are proposing for students to not only eat breakfast in the classroom, but lunch as well.”

Ricardo noted that before the pandemic, custodial staff in LAUSD have been continually eroded, saying: “Because of the infrequent cleaning, teachers have had to do the work of the custodians or put up with filthy classrooms. According to health codes, such classrooms need to be cleaned and mopped every day. At best, they sweep once a week and mop ‘as needed,’ which is as little as once a month. Well, I did contact the Health Department about this. Probably the district got some kind of waiver to allow students to eat in classrooms.”

Asked his opinion of the unions’ response to the crisis, Ricardo said, “The national teacher unions, the NEA (National Education Association) and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers), are sellout appendages of the Democratic Party, as are most if not all state unions and local unions. They’re going to follow the push to reopen the businesses and schools, people be damned.”

Referring to the strike of 33,000 Los Angeles teachers in 2019 that was shut down after six days by the United

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Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which agreed to a sellout deal that failed to meet the teachers' demands for reduced class sizes, increased wages, and stopping the expansion of charter schools, Ricardo said, "Last year we all went out on strike for the first time since 1989. The district did some clever maneuvers, and the union just got snookered."

Describing the rotten deal and how it was forced through, Ricardo said, "It was a three-year contract, and the bulk of the increases and extra hiring all kick in during the last year. So, we never got what they promised, and the UTLA called it a 'historic victory.'"

"They crow about us getting a 10 percent raise and many other things," Ricardo said. "One point in the contract called for cutting testing by 50 percent, but if you look carefully at the language, it said a committee would be set up to investigate it! Reductions in testing didn't occur. Most of the increases in nurses, counselors and other staff were due to kick in during the last year of the contract, and that didn't materialize either.

Commenting on the lawsuit filed by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Michigan against Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to rescind the 30,000 physical signature requirement to gain ballot access in the presidential election due to the danger and illegality of public signature gathering over recent months, Ricardo said, "I totally support the SEP lawsuits to get Kishore and Santa Cruz on the ballot."

"If you go into the grocery store, you can choose from 25 different toothpastes. But during the elections, it's only the Democrats and Republicans, and both are championing 'schools of choice.' What's that? It's the privatization of public education. They will make it next to impossible to put a third party, another choice, on the ballot. So, I support your lawsuits."

The WSWS also spoke with a Richmond, Virginia high school science teacher of over 20 years. Lisa, whose name has been changed here at her request over concerns about victimization by her district and union, said that she was concerned about the lack of a scientifically based strategy in the fight against the pandemic. "It's not science-based. It's not education-based. It's economics-based and ideology-based," she said.

Noting that the federal government pushed responsibility for containing the virus onto the states and school districts, Lisa stated, "There are thousands of different plans and there is no cohesion. Yes, maybe a plan does need to be different in an area where you've got very few kids and very low transmission. But the standard should be that we get everybody to very low transmission before we start bringing people back in."

Asked how she feels about her union's response to the back-to-school campaign, Lisa said, "I'm not impressed with the fact that the NEA is not standing up out there and pushing back against so many of these things that they should be fighting for, including protecting the health of teachers and kids."

Lisa noted the NEA's lack of response to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) statement, which argued that the "school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school." She commented, "When you've got groups like pediatricians saying they have to go back to school, you're seeing that all over the place being parroted back. There should have been push back against that when it first came out."

Responding to the attempt in the media and among politicians to divide teachers and parents on the issue of reopening schools, Lisa said, "I think we need to have the teachers joining together with the other professions, with the other workers. We are being forced to go back as babysitters so that their parents can be forced to go back to their dangerous jobs to generate profits for the corporations.

"If we refuse to go back and say, 'No, we will not be part of this. We will not participate in this,' we can actually have a chance of changing it, especially if we make it clear to the parents that 'We are fighting for you to get unemployment [insurance] if you need it. We are fighting for you to get universal healthcare right now.'"

Lisa added, "The situation is being manipulated so that teachers are being forced to be complicit in propping up this system."

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