

Teacher unions support drive to reopen US schools as pandemic explodes

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Last week, the Trump administration and several state and local governments launched their campaign to reopen schools with daily in-person instruction across the country. On July 6 Trump provocatively tweeted, “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” This was followed on July 7 by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos telling a meeting of governors, “Schools must reopen, they must be fully operational.” Florida’s Department of Education issued an order requiring five days of in-person instruction when their schools reopen in August, sparking immediate protests from teachers.

Nationwide the pandemic is spiraling out of control after lockdowns were lifted and social distancing measures relaxed with no plan at the federal, state, or local levels to contain the disease. Friday saw a record 71,373 new infections nationwide in one day. The increase of new cases is paralleled by a steadily increasing death toll, with 830 lives lost Friday. A return to in-person instruction under these conditions, where even the pretense of containing the pandemic has been abandoned, is homicidal. With ongoing community transmission, classrooms would become major vectors for further transmission.

Teachers have responded with outrage to this callous disregard for the safety of students, teachers, and staff. Spontaneous discussion between teachers on social media in areas like Arizona and Oakland, California immediately turned to organizing strikes to prevent in-person teaching where the pandemic is growing.

For their part, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) have solidarized themselves with the demand for students to physically return to school, merely quibbling over the details. On July 10 they released a joint statement with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) stating: “Educators and pediatricians share the goal of children returning safely to school this fall. Our organizations are

committed to doing everything we can so that all students have the opportunity to safely resume in-person learning.” In working with the AAP, the unions signed on with an organization providing pseudoscientific justifications for the Trump administration’s drive to reopen schools.

On June 26 the AAP released their “Guidance for School Re-entry” which “**strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school** [bolding in original].” This reckless guidance was given as new cases in the US were already soaring to record highs. In the AAP’s specific guidelines, scientific proposals are filled with caveats subordinated to economic concerns. For elementary schools they state as a high priority, “Desks should be placed 3 to 6 feet apart when feasible,” but list reducing class sizes to make this “feasible” a low priority, because “The risk reduction of reducing class sizes in elementary school-aged children may be outweighed by the challenge of doing so.”

After decades of budget cuts and bipartisan privatization schemes, public schools across the country are woefully underfunded. More than 30 students are regularly crammed into classrooms. School nurses, when schools even have them, cover thousands of students. Basic healthcare supplies, like bathroom soap and paper towels, run out months before the school year ends. Under the economic impact of the pandemic, schools are bracing for sharp cuts to education funding. In May the Learning Policy Institute estimated that states would require an additional \$230 billion to fund education through the coming fiscal year.

Throughout the current pandemic, there has been overwhelming bipartisan support for providing public money to banks and corporations while carrying out cuts to social services. Democratic senators like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders voted for the CARES Act, which funneled trillions of dollars to prop up the stock

market but provided only \$13.5 billion for K-12 education. Now the Democratic Party is promoting the HEROES Act, passed by the House, that only provides \$60 billion of relief to K-12, leaving roughly \$170 billion in education cuts to be made this year.

That was enough for AFT President Randi Weingarten, who tweeted on Thursday: “A reminder that if we really want to reopen schools, the Senate needs to pass the #HEROESact.” In other words, all Weingarten needs to take her “seat at the table” and push teachers back into the classrooms is for the budget cuts to come from the Democrats.

On Thursday, the AFT held a “School Reopening Roundtable” chaired by Weingarten with Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Dr. Jill Biden, Joseph Biden’s wife. None of the speakers suggested any action to oppose the forced reopening of schools under conditions of the accelerated spread of COVID-19, and not once were any of recent strikes or protests by teachers mentioned.

Elizabeth Warren cynically dismissed the concerns of teachers fearful for their own health and safety, the health and safety of their students and the broader community by declaring, “I get it.” Ignoring the recent mass struggles by teachers over cuts to education funding she added, “but the next time you feel frustrated, do something about it.. .. The thing you can do is you can sit down and think, ‘OK, we are aiming toward November 3rd. How do we make sure, make sure, make sure, make sure that Joe Biden is going to be elected and that we’re going to get Democrats up and down the ballot.’”

The claim that electing Democrats will protect the lives of teachers and students forced into the classroom during the pandemic is absurd. All across the country Democratic governors have lined up behind the return to work and sanctioned ending all measures to seriously confront the pandemic. Meanwhile, they completely accept plans to force the cost of the CARES Act’s multitrillion dollar corporate bailout to be paid for through cuts to education and other services.

Already California, with a Democratic governor and state legislature, has passed a budget delaying a record \$11 billion in payments to school districts until the next fiscal year forcing cuts upon districts. In no state was the time spent social distancing used to hire enough contact tracers and expand hospital capacity to actually contain the pandemic.

Weingarten, Warren and the Biden campaign imagine teachers have no memory. When the Obama

administration with Joseph Biden as vice president took over in 2009, a Democratic majority controlled both the House of Representatives and Senate. Immediately they launched a nationwide campaign against public education, including massive budget cuts and the promotion of privately run charter schools. The budget cuts were so deep that 12 years later when schools were closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, per pupil spending in many states remained below 2008 levels. The chronic underfunding of public schools in the United States over the past decade was a policy carried out by the Democrats.

The bipartisan assault on education drove a series of militant struggles that were bitterly opposed by the trade unions. Beginning in February 2018 teachers in the United States launched a series of wildcat strikes outside of the trade union straitjacket. First, in West Virginia, then Oklahoma and Arizona, followed by strikes in Los Angeles, Oakland, and protests in many more states, teachers took a brave stand to demand living wages and safe working conditions. In each case, Weingarten and the AFT fought tooth and nail to isolate the strikes and demobilize them. During the Arizona strike, Weingarten explicitly opposed a nationwide teachers strike, telling the WSWS that “education is a statewide issue” and she wanted “to make sure that these walkouts become walk-ins to the voting booth in November.”

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, at the national and local levels have proven themselves unwilling and incapable of fighting the pandemic. We urge teachers, students, parents and workers to form rank-and-file safety and workplace committees in every school and neighborhood to determine under what conditions schools should reopen.

Preparations must be made for a nationwide strike of teachers and school workers to block the unsafe reopening and demand a crash program to rebuild the schools and hire the necessary staff to provide high quality, safe and equal education for all. No teacher or school should be penalized for refusing to work under unsafe conditions. There must be no loss of income as long as the pandemic continues.



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