

Growing wave of educators' protests forces Trump to throw a financial sop to schools

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Yesterday, US President Donald Trump announced at a White House news conference that some schools “may delay” their reopening in “virus hot spots.” He also said he would ask Congress to allocate \$105 billion to schools, under conditions in which the Learning Policy Institute projects that states face combined education funding deficits of between \$295 and \$370 billion.

The apparent climbdown from his insistence that schools must “fully” open “ASAP” and that the modest funding for schools in the Democrats' HEROES bill was “dead on arrival” indicates the deep crisis of the administration. The ruling elite is increasingly fearful of the political mobilization of hundreds of thousands of educators, parents and students, who refuse to put their lives or those of their children at risk.

Trump, nonetheless, continued to exploit the crisis to undermine public education, noting that the \$105 billion would include the stipulation that if a given local district did not reopen according to his dictates, the money could “follow the child.” These are code words for transferring funds to private, religious or privately-managed charter schools.

Shortly after Trump's press conference, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released its updated guidelines for reopening schools, which represent the prostration of science before the social interests of the ruling class. The guidelines give full support to Trump's demand that schools resume in-person instruction while minimizing the immense dangers posed to students, educators and parents.

While seemingly large, the amount of money Trump claims to support for schools is a tiny fraction of the \$2.2 trillion that was handed over to corporations under the CARES bailout and the \$4 trillion made available for cheap loans to banks and corporations.

Last year, a “State of Our Schools” report indicated that \$145 billion would be required on an annual basis to modernize and maintain US schools. This was, of course, long before the additional critically necessary upgrade to ventilation systems needed to inhibit virus transmission was even contemplated.

Decades of cuts to public education have produced dilapidated, unsafe schools. During the eight years of the Obama administration, this worsened, as districts were forced to compete in a race to the bottom. Meanwhile, corporations

enriched themselves through a vast privatization of education.

For Trump, the Democrats and Wall Street, the current proposal is just so much small change compared with the profits that can be made getting workers back on the job. Moreover, they hope the minimal funding, together with their ongoing collaboration with the teachers' unions, will demobilize educators.

Trump's moves come in response to tens of thousands of teachers, parents and students across the country organizing rallies, protests at school board meetings and car caravans in opposition to the bipartisan ultimatum for the reopening of the schools. Many were particularly enraged after Trump pledged to pull federal aid from districts that failed to fully resume in-person instruction.

Opposition to this homicidal demand threatens to break out of the control of the established political parties and pro-capitalist trade unions. The hashtags #refusetoreturn and #nationalteacherstrike have been trending, while new Facebook groups of educators opposed to the return to school are mushrooming, largely independent of the unions. Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have made clear that they support the return to the classroom so that “parents who work outside the home can go to work,” in the words of AFT President Randi Weingarten.

Just a day earlier, on Wednesday, Trump reiterated that he was “100 percent” in favor of schools opening in the fall. He claimed young people “don't bring it home with them,” despite a recently concluded and well-regarded large-scale study from South Korea, which showed that children between 10 and 19 spread the virus at least as much as adults. While claiming that he was “comfortable” with his children and grandchildren returning to in-person learning, it was later revealed that Barron Trump's private school (annual tuition \$40,000 plus) would not open “fully” face to face.

Under the impact of growing militancy by educators and parents from coast to coast, many districts have already begun revising their plans. As of yesterday, nine of the 15 largest districts in the US, with roughly 2 million students, opted to start the year with remote learning only. But with more than 13,000 public school systems and no national policy or any

serious financial assistance for infection control, the situation everywhere is uncertain, chaotic and patchwork.

Each local district has the ultimate authority on reopening, but none have the necessary preconditions—mass testing, contact tracing and funding for infrastructure retooling. Twenty-five percent of US schools do not even have a school nurse. Meanwhile, the pandemic rages out of control everywhere.

In some areas, such as Chicago, the unions have called protests in order to preempt educators' widespread anger, while keeping them under the thumb of the Democratic Party. But in most areas, particularly in the South, the eruption of demonstrations has been driven by teachers themselves.

Jacksonville, Florida educator Sasha Bass was part of a Tuesday caravan protest that traveled from the Duval County Public School headquarters to a nearby cemetery. She spoke for many when she said, "We're no good in the grave. We just want to live!" according to *FirstCoast News*. Many of the teachers at the cemetery signed documents designating the city's mayor as their "health care surrogates."

"People are meeting virtually to decide whether we go back in the classroom," said teacher and event organizer Alex Ingram. "That tells you enough. If you have to meet virtually, you are not ready to go back in the classroom." Yesterday, Florida registered 10,249 new cases, bringing the horrific total to 389,868, with 5,518 deaths.

The overwhelming opposition by Florida educators has resulted in an attempt at face-saving by the Florida Education Association. It has filed a lawsuit against the "unsafe reopening of schools" as a violation of the state Constitution. Like all of the union machinations at the state level, the move is designed to avoid the threat of strike action and cover for the official support for the reopening of schools by their national affiliate, the National Education Association (NEA). The latest protests follow those in Mississippi and Texas and continuing actions by Florida and Arizona teachers.

On Wednesday, **East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana** teachers rallied to oppose plans to partially open schools August 6. They carried signs, including "Educators essential but not expendable!" and "I can't teach Algebra 2 from my grave." This week, the New Orleans district announced it would delay its plans to reopen until after Labor Day.

Yesterday, **Alabama** teachers organized through the Facebook group Alabama Teachers Against COVID, which is independent of the Alabama Education Association and the Alabama Federation of Teachers, marched on Montgomery. The group, founded by a speech-language pathologist in Montgomery, has mushroomed to more than 5,400 followers. "I'm really scared," Jacquelyn Edwards told *Advance Local*. Edwards, a 16-year high school chemistry teacher in Jefferson County, added, "Teachers are the guinea pigs. We are the experiment." She noted that schools are not physically able to accommodate CDC guidelines, stating, "Our hallways are so small and our windows don't even open."

Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds announced ~~that~~ that schools must hold at least 50 percent of classes in person, teachers prepared their obituaries and began sending them to her. Sioux City teacher Jeremy Dumkreiger initiated the idea and started a Facebook group, Iowa Educators for a Safe Return to School, which has quickly grown to 16,000 members. The group will host a caravan protest next Saturday.

Arizona educators continue to step up their protests. The death of Kimberley Chavez Lopez from COVID-19 has galvanized the anger of teachers throughout the state. Hundreds participated in "motor marches" on Wednesday in Scottsdale, Tempe, Gilbert, Glendale, Tucson and Yuma. Messages scrawled on cars included: "I'd rather see your kids on a laptop than a ventilator," "Teachers are not martyrs" and "AZ #1 in COVID."

Mitchella Stevens, a middle school teacher in the Cartwright School District, told local media that she and other teachers did not want to be "test subjects." She added, "I want consecutive days of no new cases. I want it to be safe so that my students won't take anything home and hurt their families, and I want to be able to also visit my elderly parents."

Smaller demonstrations have occurred in areas too numerous to detail, but include Plainfield, Illinois; Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; Fort Mill, South Carolina; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Louisville, Kentucky.

On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, the rich, seeking to protect their children from the virus, are creating a cottage industry of micro-schools. In these ad hoc operations, well-to-do parents hire teachers, create small student "pods" among themselves, and even sometimes rent apartments to facilitate this private education. The costs, according to those involved, run upwards from that of private daycare, especially as parents rent stand-alone facilities. An uptick has also been noted among private school applications.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon educators, parents and students to advance their struggle against the homicidal return to school policy by developing a network of independent rank-and-file safety committees. The struggle against both the virus itself and all issues related to a safe return to public education requires a comprehensive society-wide mobilization of resources in the interests of the working class. Such an initiative is entirely incompatible with the profit-driven capitalist system, its two political parties and the pro-capitalist trade unions. We urge all those seeking to develop fighting organizations to ensure the safety and well-being of educators and all workers to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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