

Teachers face battle as Trump pushes school reopenings

Evan Blake
28 July 2020

After waging years of strikes and protests against cuts to school funding and wages, educators in the US are heading into a direct confrontation with the Trump administration over its drive to reopen schools as the pandemic continues to rage out of control. At a press conference Friday, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany branded teachers “essential personnel,” comparing them to meatpackers, saying “schools are essential places of business.”

The comparison between meatpackers and teachers is no accident. From the outset of the pandemic, meat processing plants became some of the most dangerous workplaces in the US and globally, with over 30,000 workers infected and more than 100 killed by COVID-19. Facing walkouts and job actions at 22 plants across the US in April, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to force workers back on the job.

The Trump administration’s criminal policy of forcing teachers back into classrooms as the pandemic continues to spread uncontrollably will lead to the deaths of countless teachers, students and their family members.

The White House’s declaration that teachers are “essential” is absurd, coming from an administration single-mindedly determined to destroy public education through budget cuts and privatization. Trump does not care about students. He only cares about getting kids out of the house so their parents can go to work generating profits for corporations.

Having given the corporations trillions of dollars in government bailouts and free cash from the federal reserve, the ruling class is determined to pump profits out of workers to pay for it.

Spearheading the resurgence of class struggle in the US since the powerful statewide wildcat strike organized by West Virginia teachers in February 2018, teachers and education workers have moved increasingly to the left and become more radicalized, with many participating in the

mass, multiracial demonstrations against the police murder of George Floyd.

Facebook groups opposed to the reopening of schools have quickly been joined by thousands of educators and parents, while car caravans and rallies denouncing the reopening plans of Democrats and Republicans have taken place in dozens of cities across the country. On Monday, New Jersey educators and parents began a “week of action” against Democratic Governor Phil Murphy’s demand that schools reopen with at least partial in-person instruction.

The Trump administration’s use of paramilitary forces in Portland and other cities—now being directed at largely peaceful protesters—is only a test run for the use of state intimidation and violence against the working class as a whole. This includes teachers and their supporters.

To justify its demand to open the schools, the Trump administration is actively undermining science. In a recent interview, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos declared, “More and more studies show that kids are actually stoppers of the disease, and they don’t get it and transmit it themselves.”

This was echoed last week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which claimed “the rate of infection among younger school children, and from students to teachers, has been low.”

In reality, thousands of children around the world have become infected, and a growing number are dying from COVID-19. In Florida, over 23,000 minors have tested positive, while five minors have died, including Kimora Lynum, a nine-year-old girl with no preexisting conditions. In Tennessee, 7,572 children ages 5-18 have tested positive for the virus.

In a comprehensive study from South Korea, which involved the contact tracing and testing of nearly 60,000 people who had contact with 5,706 COVID-19 patients, the results “found the highest COVID-19 rate for

household contacts of school-aged children.”

If all schools adhered to Trump’s demands, the result would be the deaths of hundreds of thousands of educators, students and parents, and an exponential spread of the pandemic.

In an effort to justify this homicidal policy, the Trump administration and Democratic politicians shed crocodile tears about the impact of school closures on children. What boundless hypocrisy! These same politicians have carried out savage austerity for decades, creating overcrowded classrooms and understaffed offices.

With states facing a combined education funding deficit of at least \$300 billion this year, both parties are preparing the greatest assault on public education in US history. A crucial aim of the drive to reopen schools is to force older, more experienced educators into retirement so as to further undermine public education.

Since 2018, over 700,000 educators have engaged in strikes in over a dozen states controlled by both Republicans and Democrats, including Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Washington, California, Kentucky, Illinois and North Carolina. Internationally, mass protests and strikes have taken place in dozens of countries across all six habitable continents.

This powerful strike wave was systematically betrayed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), with AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García jetting across the country to negotiate sellout contracts and isolate every struggle that broke out. They worked to channel all opposition behind the Democratic Party, which from Obama on down spearheaded the assault on public education.

The teacher unions are now blocking a mass mobilization of educators to oppose Trump’s moves to reopen schools. Instead, they are lobbying for the passage of the fraudulent HEROES Act, which allocates merely \$60 billion for schools, while shilling for Joe Biden, who collaborated in the eight-year assault on public education during the Obama administration.

An enormous confrontation is brewing between the working class on the one side and the Trump administration and both big business parties on the other. While some Democrats have announced delays to in-person teaching, they have demonstrated again and again that they will not let safety get in the way of corporate profit.

To carry out a genuine fight back, educators, parents and students must establish a broad network of rank-and-

file safety committees, independent of the unions and both big business parties, in every school and neighborhood. These committees should also draw in educators at daycare centers, private schools and charter schools to prepare for a nationwide strike to prevent the unsafe resumption of in-person instruction.

These committees must establish connections with every section of the working class to organize a mass movement against the capitalist system. The unification of the working class of every race and ethnicity is paramount, and all efforts by the unions, the Democrats and their pseudo-left appendages to inject racist politics must be opposed. The pandemic has sharply exposed that the key issue in society is *class*, not race, as the criminal indifference of the ruling class devastates workers of every race and ethnicity.

Immense resources are needed to guarantee universal access to high quality education and provide internet access to all, and to allocate essential food and health services. Carrying out these policies requires a radical redistribution of wealth, which will only be possible through the socialist transformation of society.

Above all, educators face a political struggle against the Trump administration and the financial oligarchy for which he speaks. The coming weeks and months will see a vast increase in social tensions and growing resistance by the working class to the capitalist policies of austerity and death. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fighting to build a revolutionary leadership to guide the coming struggles to a successful conclusion. We urge educators and all workers to join the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact