

As opposition mounts to reopening of schools, US teacher union opposes national strike

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Across the United States, teachers and parents are increasingly opposed to the reopening of schools as the pandemic continues to surge across the country. Protests against the imminent reopening erupted this week in Michigan, New Jersey, Rhode Island and other states.

In opposition to President Trump's demand for full, in-person instruction from the start of the school year, teachers are demanding online-only instruction until there are no new cases of community transmission.

Poll after poll shows that there is widespread opposition to a return to in-person education until the virus is contained. An AP poll last week showed only 8 percent of the population supported opening schools as usual while 77 percent supported major adjustments or having no in-person instruction at all. Teachers in districts as far apart as California and Texas have threatened strikes to protect students and families.

Under these conditions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second largest teachers union in the US, is trying to limit and isolate the emerging teachers' struggles. At their biennial convention being held online this week, AFT officials passed a resolution on the reopening of schools, which paid lip service to the safety of educators and students but included no serious actions to oppose the reckless and deadly policy.

Instead, AFT locals "will use every action and tool available to us from serving on state and local reopening committees to filing grievances, lawsuits and other actions against unsafe and unsound plans or the faulty implementation of plans." According to the resolution they would only support "local and/or state affiliate safety strikes on a case-by-case basis as a last resort."

In other words, the AFT and its state and local affiliates will collaborate with government officials to reopen the schools while the union diverts and dissipates anger with impotent grievances and legal complaints. In the event this is not enough to stop the teachers from taking strike action, the AFT will do everything to prevent local and state walkouts from coalescing into a powerful nationwide strike against

the two corporate-controlled parties.

This is exactly what the AFT and its counterpart, the National Education Association (NEA), did in response of the wave of teachers strikes that spread across the country in 2018–19, beginning with the wildcat strikes by educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona. With growing demands for a nationwide strike to demand improved school funding, wages and working conditions, the unions deliberately isolated each strike and cut deals with Republican and Democratic state governments which betrayed the teachers' demands and have only left educators more vulnerable to the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

While AFT insists that the conditions under which the schools will be reopened is a local issue, that is not the way Trump looks at it. The Trump administration is determined to get children out of their homes so that their parents can get back to work and resume the flow of profits needed to pay for the massive bailout of Wall Street. While the Democrats pose as critics of Trump and work more closely with the unions, they are just as determined to force teachers back into the classrooms, regardless of the deadly consequences.

Teachers are confronting a bipartisan push to reopen the economy as COVID-19 deaths across the US have reached their highest level since May, with nearly 1,500 deaths recorded Wednesday. The lifting of social distancing measures in Democratic and Republican controlled states alike has led to a renewed surge in infections with Texas, Florida and California leading the way and the country as a whole reaching 4.5 million cases.

Despite the absurd claims by Trump's education secretary Betsy DeVos that children are "actually stoppers of the disease, and they don't get it and transmit it themselves," the number of child infections and hospitalizations in Florida has risen by 34 percent and 23 percent, respectively, and thousands of children have been infected in Tennessee and other states.

There is no safe way to reopen schools while there is

ongoing community transmission. The density of students crammed into dilapidated and poorly ventilated buildings rotating through playgrounds and cafeterias makes schools a central vector for disease transmission. According to Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, between 20 and 40 percent of infections now are asymptomatic. Precisely because children are younger and healthier, asymptomatic infection is more prevalent among them. This means taking temperatures and checking for other symptoms is virtually meaningless. The only way to check for infections would be daily testing with immediate results, which officials say is unfeasible.

During an online forum Tuesday night, AFT President Randi Weingarten, leading member of the Democratic National Committee, emphasized the economic need to resume in-person instruction. In an effort to give a scientific cover for the return-to-school policy, Weingarten brought on Dr. Fauci.

While Fauci claimed the schools could be reopened safely, in the end he could provide no scientific proof that this was the case. “In many respects, unfortunately, though this may sound a little scary and harsh, I don’t mean it to be that way, is that you’re going to be actually part of the experiment, of the learning curve, of what we need to know.”

Teachers listening live on Facebook immediately responded. “Why is it acceptable to make teachers lab rats when they didn’t sign up for that?” wrote one. “Being part of the experiment is more than a little scary,” said another, “It’s a lot scary.”

The “experiment” of beginning in-person instruction while the pandemic is spreading unchecked throughout the US can have only one outcome, a sharp increase in transmission. No country that has closed its schools due to the pandemic has yet reopened them without attempting to contain the outbreak first. Israel is a demonstrative case of the dangers facing US teachers. On May 17, a day when there were only 10 new cases reported throughout the country of over 9 million people, the Netanyahu government announced a full reopening of schools. Throughout June the pandemic spread with 47 percent of new infections occurring in schools. Now total cases have quadrupled, deaths have doubled since schools reopened and the daily average of new cases in the country is 1,750. No US state has a community transmission rate as low as Israel when it resumed in-person instruction.

There is enormous opposition to this reckless and murderous policy. Dana, a Pittsburgh public school teacher, told the WSWS, “Reopening the schools will absolutely fuel the spread of COVID but I’m never surprised when people in power make bad decisions that negatively impact kids and teachers. Lawmakers have not actually valued education for

a long time, and this is evident through lack of funding. It’s no shock that the people forcing this also don’t care about protecting the lives of kids, teachers and their families.”

To defend the lives of educators, students and parents, new forms of organization, independent of the AFT and NEA, have to be created. In every school and neighborhood, rank-and-file safety committees must be organized. They must be connected to a national network of committees to prepare and organize a nationwide strike by 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.

Because educators are engaged in a battle against the Trump administration, which is seeking to establish a presidential dictatorship and use military repression to crush social opposition, teachers must reach out to every section of the working class—autoworkers, Amazon and other logistics workers, health care workers and others—to prepare a common struggle.

This must be combined with a political counteroffensive against both corporate-controlled parties, which have spent decades gutting public education and promoting school privatization. After handing over trillions to Wall Street, both parties are preparing a massive attack on public education. To defend the right to high-quality public education, the working class must fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism and a radical redistribution of wealth from the corporate and financial oligarchy to the masses of working people.



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