Hundreds of thousands mobilize on social media to oppose US school reopenings

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Over the past month, an explosion of opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools in the US and around the world has developed on social media, primarily through Facebook but also on Twitter and other platforms. Dozens of Facebook groups have emerged globally, from Rhode Island to Texas, to South Africa, Great Britain, and many other countries, with a combined membership of well over 300,000.

In the US, many of these groups ballooned in size in early July as the Trump administration ramped up its campaign to force schools to resume in-person instruction at the same time the COVID-19 pandemic began to spiral out of control. The number of daily new cases has surpassed 50,000 every day since July 7, the day after Trump tweeted, "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!"

Trump, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, and their Republican allies at the state level have given the crudest, most anti-scientific justifications for reopening schools. But there is a bipartisan push to resume in-person instruction in order to get children out of the house so their parents can be forced to return to unsafe factories and resume pumping out profits for the corporations.

Many of the largest Facebook groups have been formed in states run by the Democratic Party, including Rhode Island, Hawaii and Colorado, where Democrats are pushing for in-person learning. Both parties are highly conscious that the immense bailout that they handed to the financial oligarchy through the CARES Act must be paid for through the production of real value by the working class, no matter how many become infected or die.

The recklessness of the moves by the ruling class to reopen schools is underscored by the experience in countries all over the world that have reopened and quickly seen spikes in community transmission. Most notable is Israel, where the number of total cases has quadrupled, and the number of deaths doubled since school reopened unconditionally. The opening of schools has been linked to an estimated 47 percent of new infections.

The first school district in the US to begin the fall semester with fully in-person instruction was in Corinth, Mississippi, where school began on Monday. Republican Governor Tate Reeves has issued no statewide mandate, leaving the decision with each local school district, while the virus spreads rapidly throughout the state. According to a survey by the Mississippi Association of Education (MAE), 41 percent of respondents said they had received no communication from their district on reopening plans, with most start dates less than a month away. Neither the MAE nor the two national teacher unions have done anything to prevent the reckless openings.

In nearly every Facebook group opposing school openings, educators and parents noted the immense hypocrisy of Trump's call Thursday for postponing the 2020 elections due to safety concerns, while maintaining his demand that schools reopen. As yet, however, many members of these Facebook groups express illusions in the Democratic Party, which fears and opposes any movement of the working class against Trump far more than the president's increasingly dictatorial moves.

In **Texas**, three large Facebook groups have developed to oppose reopening, with a combined membership of 63,400 members: Texas Teachers for Safe Reopening (47,600 members), Texas Teachers United Against Reopening Schools (11,800 members) and Texans for Safe Schools (4,000 members). Texas saw a state record 313 deaths from COVID-19 Wednesday and an additional 9,217 new cases, and is on track to surpass New York this weekend to become the state with the third highest number of cases in the US.

On Tuesday, state authorities issued policies that compel schools to resume in-person instruction no later than the eighth week of school, regardless of the state of the pandemic. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton released a legal statement saying local public health officials cannot preemptively require schools to remain closed at the start of the year. Other state officials then reversed a previous decision and declared that school districts that stay closed longer than eight weeks will lose state funding.

One post about these developments on Texas Teachers for Safe Reopening reads, "Thanks to the AG [Attorney General], my district is now going back next week instead of September 8. You have got to be kidding me." The post has drawn over 640 reactions and over 315 comments, the vast majority denouncing Paxton. Many comments call for a fight back and note that similar moves have happened or likely will happen in other districts. One comment reads, "We must let him know there will be blood on his hands," while another states, "It is all a game about power and money."

In **Rhode Island**, the group "R.I. Parents/Educators for Safe Schools" formed on July 9 and now has over 13,400 members. The group launched in opposition to Democratic Governor Gina Raimondo's dictate that schools resume in-person instruction on August 31, which she continues to demand. A rally held Monday

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was organized through the Facebook group, with signs saying, “I cannot teach if I’m dead” and “this plan will kill.”

In **Iowa**, the group “Iowa Educators for a Safe Return to School” has garnered over 20,100 members in roughly a month. Republican Governor Kim Reynolds has insisted that local districts resume in-person instruction, and on Thursday released guidance mandating that Iowa schools can only switch to online learning if their county has a coronavirus positivity rate of at least 15 percent. This figure is highly elevated, and would entail widespread community transmission, as well as an overall low testing rate. One comment on a post in the above group asks, “What if no tests are available?” Another states, “She will just manipulate the numbers and change her proclamation again.”

Additional major groups that have been formed include the following:

• In **South Africa**, the group “Parents Against The Opening Of Schools,” formed on May 19, is the largest such group in the world, with over 113,200 members.

• In the **UK**, the group “Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools” has over 4,700 members since launching on May 3. Administrator Jennifer Jones spoke with the WSWS about the motivations behind forming the group and its aims.

• “US Teachers for Safe Schools” has over 1,200 members since forming on July 5.

• “Arkansans For Safe Public Schools” has attracted over 12,000 members since launching on June 28.

• “Hawaii for a Safe Return to Schools” has over 6,000 members after forming on July 10. Classes have been scheduled to resume statewide on August 4, but given push-back from educators and parents this may be delayed until August 17.

• “Indiana for a Safe Return to Schools” has over 12,600 members since launching on July 8.

• “Colorado Schools for Safe Openings - 14 Days No New Cases” was created on July 7 and has over 8,700 members

• “Alabama Teachers Against COVID-19” has amassed 6,300 members since June 29.

• Parents and teachers formed the page “Mississippi Teachers Unite,” which has over 1,450 members, and organized a demonstration recently against the unsafe reopening of schools.

• “Ohio Teachers for safe reopening” was formed on July 5 and has attracted over 1,600 members.

Each of the above Facebook groups, and the vast majority that have been established, were initiated by educators rather than the local, state and national teacher unions. They have become democratic forums for educators, parents and students to discuss and critique the drive to reopen schools, which has the backing of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).

At least 30 Facebook groups now exist in over 20 states across the US, demonstrating the broad-based yearning to protect the lives and health of educators, students, parents and the broader population.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on educators, parents and students to form a network of independent, rank-and-file committees to unite across district and state lines and prepare for a nationwide strike to prevent the resumption of in-person instruction until the virus has been completely contained.

While paying lip service to a “safe reopening of the schools,” the AFT and NEA are operating as full partners in the bipartisan drive to put teachers and children back in the classrooms. The unions are opposed to a nationwide strike by teachers that would immediately put educators on a political collision course with the Trump administration, along with the Democratic Party the unions support.

The media has presented AFT President Randi Weingarten as a fighter for the working class because an AFT resolution passed this week states that the AFT would support “local and/or state affiliate safety strikes on a case-by-case basis as a last resort.”

In fact, this resolution was only adopted as an effort to head off the growing sentiments for a nationwide strike and keep educators under the stranglehold of the unions and the Democratic Party. The AFT wants to isolate educators on a local and state basis, and to do everything in its power to prevent a broad-based movement of educators, parents and the entire working class, in particular during the lead-up to the 2020 elections in which the unions are promoting Biden as the supposed alternative to Trump. Since the launching of the powerful statewide wildcat strike of West Virginia teachers in February 2018, this has been the essential role played by the AFT and NEA, which facilitated betrayal after betrayal in districts and states across the country.

As vice president, Biden played a key role in the Obama administration’s assault on teachers, promotion of charter schools and other privatization schemes, along with the greatest transfer of wealth, until today, from the bottom to the corporate and financial elite at the top. Biden, a longtime shill of Wall Street, is just as committed to the reckless back-to-school and back-to-work policy as Trump, albeit with somewhat more assistance from the unions.

The central task facing educators is to organize independently of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties, through the formation of an interconnected web of rank-and-file committees fully committed to ensuring the safety and lives of educators, students and the entire working class.

The working class faces a political struggle against the Trump administration, both political parties and the entire capitalist system. The defeat of the pandemic and vast expansion of funding for education requires a radical redistribution of wealth and the reorganization of society to provide for human needs, i.e., the struggle for socialism. We urge all those who wish to fight for such a perspective to contact us today.

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