

New York educators oppose city and state school reopening plans

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On Monday, hundreds of New York City teachers, parents and students marched to the city's Department of Education (DOE) headquarters in lower Manhattan to protest Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to open public schools in September under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic.

The New York City public school system is the largest in the United States, with approximately 1.1 million students.

In conjunction with a National Day of Resistance that featured rallies and car caravans of educators in cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago and Philadelphia to protest the unsafe resumption of classes, rank-and-file teachers marched from the headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) near Wall Street carrying body bags and coffins and a mock guillotine with a blade that read "DOE."

Educators on Twitter participated under the hashtag #WeWon'tDieForDOE. One Bronx teacher told the mayor, "Buildings aren't safe. Your plans are dangerous & unrealistic. You've defunded schools." Another tweeted, "I give my all and do whatever I can for students and families, but I will not die for the DoE."

De Blasio has announced a "hybrid" school program to start on September 10. Students will go to classrooms one day and on the next learn remotely at home. Other plans mandate students to attend physical classes and virtual learning on alternate weeks. Schools will close if the number of New Yorkers testing positive for the coronavirus rises beyond 3 percent of the total number tested. Currently, about 1 percent of all those tested in New York City are infected with the virus.

According to the DOE's plan, if two or more students or staff members in the same classroom get sick and test positive for COVID-19, the classroom will be shut down and students will switch to remote learning. DOE and city health officials will investigate and the classroom will remain closed for 14 days after the investigation.

If two students or staffers in different classrooms get sick with the coronavirus, the school building will close for 24 hours. In this case, according to the DOE, "depending on the outcome" of testing and contact tracing, the building may be closed for 14 days. Each school, according to the plan, will also provide an isolation room for students who feel sick.

Teachers, principals and parents have drawn up scores of lists

of unanswered questions about the plan and posted them on blogs and social media. One of the most widespread concerns is the absence of certified nurses. The New York City public school system is lacking, by its own count, over 400 nurses. The de Blasio administration, after cutting \$773 million from this year's school budget, has no plans to hire any.

In the absence of nurses, educators have asked who will escort sick students to the isolation room and supervise them. Others have asked what the protocols are for testing sick students and if a student's friends and siblings at other schools will be tested. Another question is whether siblings' schools will even be notified of a positive test.

Educators have asked how often and how thoroughly classrooms will be cleaned. Many have raised concerns about the heating-ventilation-air conditioning (HVAC) systems in schools, questioning whether they will be able to filter the airborne coronavirus. Others have pointed out that in some buildings, air conditioning systems are inoperative and classroom windows cannot even be opened.

The DOE, many teachers have pointed out, has made no provisions for supplying personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks and face-shields. This is in a school system where, like many across the United States, draconian budget cuts by both Democratic and Republican politicians have forced teachers to purchase basic school supplies. Principals are unsure if their schools will be regularly supplied with hand sanitizer.

No attention has been given by the DOE to building entrance and exit procedures that will ensure social distancing, or safety issues related to emergency procedures such as sheltering in place or fire evacuation.

The premature reopening of the city's schools will result in a renewed public health catastrophe, similar to the one that peaked in April and May. It will follow essentially the same game plan as the one that allowed the rapid dissemination of the coronavirus throughout the city and beyond in January and February.

At that time, the Democratic mayor and governor ignored the best scientific advice for weeks, until it was too late. The teacher unions kept quiet—or actively opposed the shutting of schools and other public institutions—although they, too,

understood the threat. COVID-19 has now caused 20,000 confirmed deaths and another 5,000 probable deaths in New York City.

Governor Andrew Cuomo has not yet set a date for students to return to buildings, but while criticizing Donald Trump for his insistence on opening the schools, he has presented a program that is essentially no different from de Blasio's.

Opposition among educators is widespread throughout the state. No doubt sensitive to the anger of teachers and parents, Cuomo told a press briefing on Sunday, "If the union and the teachers aren't comfortable, they aren't going to show up. No one wants to force people to go to work. This is about common sense and public health."

Teachers have been quick to point out the absurdities of the reopening plan of the New York State Education Department (NYSED). One teacher on social media noted that the NYSED "recommends districts NOT require a negative COVID test prior to admission for in-person learning... Every year students are REQUIRED to have the appropriate vaccinations in order to attend, but no prior negative COVID test during a pandemic with a highly contagious virus that transmits asymptotically—especially in children... This is the crowning height of irresponsibility and neglect of public health in educational settings..."

Another upstate teacher said, "We are being thrown into a Petri dish, with no care for what might happen. Are we only heroes to you when there is a shooting?"

The teachers' unions in the city and state, which are little more than a wing of the Democratic Party and have supported Cuomo to the hilt, have come under increasing fire from teachers. The union in the state, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), has been widely criticized by teachers for its failure to oppose school reopening. One hashtag on Twitter is #WhereisAndy, referring to NYSUT President Andrew Pallotta.

Michael Mulgrew, president of the UFT, this week paid lip service to the sentiments of many teachers when he called for randomized testing of students for the coronavirus—though not mandatory testing of each student. "What's more," Mulgrew added, "even if there are stronger safety standards in place, we still have grave concerns about the city's ability to enforce them effectively in every school. Right now, this is not enough to protect students and staff."

Mulgrew, however, told a teachers' town hall phone-in that while he was weighing the possibility of a lawsuit against the city, there would be no strike to prevent schools from reopening.

This is the same man, representing the interests of the union officialdom, who privately warned de Blasio in March that schools should close. He said nothing to the membership of the UFT, and it was only the threat of a sick-out by rank-and-file teachers that forced the schools to shut down on March 16.

One teacher from Queens posed the question on Facebook

that many are asking: "Can union members continue to put their full trust in our union and in its leaders? I have zero trust in the DOE and the UFT when it comes to our safety and well-being."

Into the developing breach between the UFT—which did nothing to oppose this year's massive budget cuts to education—and the city's approximately 70,000 educators has stepped a "reform" faction of the union, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which sponsored the protest on Monday and is emerging as a supposed alternative to the Mulgrew leadership.

As with every faction in the UFT, MORE is devoted to propping up the authority of the Democratic Party. While it has called for a possible sick-out in the event of a school reopening, it echoes the president of the American Federation of Teachers (the parent union of the UFT) Randi Weingarten in its refusal to call for a national strike. MORE is associated with a faction of the Democratic Party, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Its march on Monday raised no criticism of the Democratic Party and was oriented to pressuring Cuomo and de Blasio.

Educators in New York cannot let themselves be isolated and herded into fruitless protests to pressure the Democrats over life-and-death issues. Thousands have died in the city and state, including at least 70 educators, from COVID-19, while both capitalist parties have allowed the disease to run rampant. At the behest of Wall Street, Cuomo, de Blasio and Trump are seeking to open schools so the working class can go back to producing wealth for the super-rich.

The disease can be stopped only by the working class itself, and teachers play a central role. As a first step, teachers need to create new democratic organizations that are independent of the two capitalist parties and the pro-capitalist trade unions: rank-and-file safety committees. A network of these committees across the US must prepare the way for a national teachers' strike to stop the unsafe reopening of the schools.

Any educator, parent or student who would like to become involved in building rank-and-file safety committees should contact the *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter*.



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