

New York Governor Cuomo sanctions statewide reopening of schools

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Demonstrating the bipartisan support for the campaign to reopen schools in the US, New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo gave the green light for all school districts in the state to resume in-person instruction in the coming weeks. Making the blanket announcement, Cuomo declared, "Good news, all schools can reopen."

In issuing this mandate, Cuomo is providing crucial political support for the Trump administration's drive to reopen schools at no matter what cost to human life.

With multiple students immediately becoming infected in numerous schools that reopened last week, there has been a mounting wave of opposition to the resumption of in-person learning. The intervention by Cuomo intensifies the homicidal campaign demanded by the ruling class that schools reopen. This is an essential component of the broader return-to-work campaign, which is necessary for the financial oligarchy to bolster the mountain of debt created by the CARES Act. As one teacher succinctly stated on social media, "The billionaires command it."

Despite its hand-wringing and supposed concern for "safety," the Democratic Party is equally beholden to the financial oligarchy, which finds sharp expression in New York, the center of Wall Street and American capitalism. Shortly after Cuomo's press conference, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, also a New York Democrat, declared, "If we don't open up the schools, you're going to hurt the economy significantly."

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio now has the support of the state to go ahead with reopening the largest school district in the country, with over 1.1 million students and 75,000 teachers, which will set a precedent for districts across the US.

At his press conference, Cuomo stated, "We have the best infection rate in the country. If any state can do it, this state can do it because we've been smart from day one."

Cuomo ignores the fact that for months New York was

the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, searing the consciousness of millions with horrific images of overflowing hospitals, the digging of mass graves on Hart Island, and trailers filled with decomposing corpses. To date 32,817 people have died in the state, more than double the death toll for any other state in the US, and over 449,000 people have been infected.

New York City was among the last major cities to impose social distancing measures. It refused to close schools until faced with an incipient teacher rebellion and kept the mass transit system running throughout the pandemic.

In pushing to reopen schools, Cuomo is preparing the ground for even more atrocities against the working class of the state and the region. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) concluded that the widespread closure of schools in mid-March saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day period and resulted in an estimated 1.37 million fewer infections over a 26-day period in the spring.

In justifying his call to reopen the schools, Cuomo stated, "By our infection rates, all school districts can open. Everywhere in the state, every region, is below the threshold that we established, which is just great news."

While New York does have a test positivity rate of one percent, relatively low among US states, the claim that this alone will prevent a mass resurgence of the pandemic is completely unscientific.

If every district in New York were to reopen, roughly 2.6 million students and 212,000 teachers would be in classrooms, without the necessary safety measures in place. Cuomo himself confessed that 127 of the state's 749 school districts have not even submitted a reopening plan, while state officials deemed an additional 50 plans to be either incomplete or deficient.

The essential preconditions for maintaining low positivity rates are the establishment of widespread and

rapid testing and a robust contact tracing program, both of which are nonexistent across the US, including throughout New York. Given the open character of state borders, with the virus accelerating in neighboring New Jersey and Connecticut, there could easily be a major upsurge in New York at any time.

Furthermore, for any school to reopen safely, it would have to be retrofitted with modern air ventilation systems, thoroughly cleaned at least daily and limited to small class sizes, among other measures. The state anticipates cutting upwards of 20 percent of education funding this fall, and New York City alone plans to cut over \$400 million, making the implementation of adequate safety measures an impossibility.

The scene photographed from North Paulding High School in Georgia, in which students were packed into hallways and many were not wearing a mask, will similarly unfold at schools that reopen across the country, leading to a rapid spread of the virus.

In announcing the reopening authorization, Cuomo hinted at the immense opposition among parents and educators, stating, “I have been deluged with calls from parents and teachers, and there is a significant level of anxiety and concern.”

In response, a public relations blitz will now begin in every district across the state, with Cuomo demanding that each district release a public notice on its plans for providing remote learning to those who demand it, as well as their plans for testing and contact tracing within individual schools. Districts must also hold multiple public meetings by August 21 to supposedly address the concerns of parents and teachers.

Cuomo’s announcement provoked a flood of opposition on social media, with educators, parents and students denouncing the move on Facebook and Twitter.

One retired teacher commented on Facebook, “How disgusting that teachers will be vilified for not being willing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the economy. I’m retired, but angry for my daughter and son-in-law who will be in school, and worried because I help with childcare and risk exposure now.”

Another wrote, “Forcing teachers and staff to risk their health and possibly lives. And of course putting our children and their families in harm’s way!! How many lives must be sacrificed??”

In contrast, the teachers unions and “progressive” Democrats have been decidedly muted in their response. New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) President Andy Pallotta merely repeated the falsehoods issued by

Cuomo, concluding that “if districts need to phase in the reopening of buildings, so be it.” American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten tweeted the NYSUT statement, adding, “Absolutely right.”

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the largest teachers union in New York City, quoted UFT President Michael Mulgrew as simply saying that reopening schools in the city “is still an open question,” provoking huge opposition to the union on Twitter from rank-and-file teachers. Mulgrew plans to adhere to anti-strike laws that apply to teachers in the city and will go only so far as pursuing legal action as a last resort.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who represents parts of the Bronx and Queens, has said nothing about Cuomo’s announcement. For that matter, she has been silent over the past month about the broader drive to reopen schools. Bernie Sanders has also provided silent consent, releasing no statements on the issue.

To prevent the unsafe reopening of schools, educators, parents and students must organize independently of the pro-corporate unions and Democratic Party and form a network of rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood. These committees must be guided by science. They must fight to connect with ever broader sections of the working class to prepare for a nationwide general strike against the reopening of the schools and the broader reopening of the economy, which has accelerated the spread of the pandemic.

Only through a broad-based movement of the working class will society be able to contain the pandemic, vastly expand public education funding and ensure that the social interests of the working class take precedence over private profit. We urge all those who wish to take up such a struggle to contact us today and sign up for the *WSWS Educators Newsletter*.



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