

Growing wave of protests across the US against school openings

Evan Blake
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Across the United States, thousands of teachers, education workers, parents and students are mobilizing to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Car caravans, demonstrations and other forms of protest are building wherever schools are slated to resume in-person instruction.

The reopening of schools is taking place in an unplanned, haphazard manner, in which each of the country's nearly 14,000 local school districts are being left to their own devices. Cash strapped schools are quickly improvising as students return, including in Oklahoma, where teachers this week were given two rolls of paper towels, three boxes of tissues, one 24-ounce bottle of spray disinfectant, and a mask and gloves to carry out daily cleaning over nine weeks.

Predictably there have already been outbreaks at schools in Georgia, Oklahoma, Indiana, Mississippi, Louisiana and Hawaii.

The scientific case against the reckless reopening of schools has been bolstered by a new study from the University of Florida based on capturing and analyzing air samples containing the live virus from hospital rooms. The study confirms that tiny droplets, known as aerosols, produced simply through speaking, can travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the recommended six feet for social distancing. The aerosols can also remain airborne for hours.

A classroom simulation shows that the spread of the virus can be significantly reduced by placing ventilation near a teacher. However, the Government Accountability Office recently found that 41 percent of school districts need to update or replace the ventilation systems in at least half of their schools, and a 2016 report by the Center for Green Schools found that 15,000 schools have indoor air quality deemed unfit for students and staff to breathe.

From the US to Brazil, South Africa, Britain, France, Australia, Germany and other countries, capitalist politicians are demanding that schools reopen in order to force parents back into unsafe workplaces to resume the flow of corporate profit. In the US—the epicenter of the global pandemic with over 5.3 million cases and nearly 170,000 deaths—the drive to reopen schools finds its most homicidal expression.

On Wednesday, the White House issued a press release that stated in part, “The education of children is more than an essential business—it’s a top national priority to ensure America can continue to aggressively compete with the rest of the world.”

Shortly after the press release, a forum was held with Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos,

and a panel of teachers, academics, and Florida Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran, who is pushing the resumption of full in-person instruction in one of the nation's epicenters. The aim of the event, titled, “Kids First: Getting America's Children Safely Back to School,” was to promote pseudoscience and downplay the risks of reopening schools.

While cynically feigning concern for students, Trump threatened to utilize the pandemic to defund public education, saying, “I’d like to see the money follow the student,” i.e., to parochial and other private schools. He added, “If a school is closed, why are we paying the school?”

Trump and his Republican allies on the state level express most nakedly the demands of the ruling class, but the return to in-person schooling is a bipartisan policy. Last week New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that “all schools can reopen” across the state, including in New York City, the largest district in the country with 1.1 million students and 135,000 teachers and support staff. In other Democratic-controlled districts like Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, schools are opening online initially or rotating online and in-person learning, but this is largely aimed at dissipating opposition and biding time to reopen fully.

Opposition to the reckless reopening of schools is mounting in the working class, whose interests are dictated by science and public health, not the rise of the stock market. Facing a concerted, bipartisan campaign to vilify educators, create divisions with parents, and use students as pawns in the return-to-work campaign, educators, parents, and students have courageously organized dozens of protests to voice their opposition.

In **Elizabeth, New Jersey**, a groundswell of resistance forced local officials to reverse their plans to provide in-person instruction, as demanded by Democratic Governor Phil Murphy. Over 400 teachers opted out of in-person instruction, prompting the school board to change to entirely online instruction at the start of the year. This decision prompted Governor Murphy to announce that he will reverse a previous policy and develop plans for remote learning in the state.

There are growing protests across **Nebraska**, where Republican Governor Pete Ricketts has promoted the resumption of in-person instruction. On Monday, over 200 educators rallied at Memorial Park in Omaha, and another 100 protested in Lincoln. One teacher dressed as the Grim Reaper held a sign saying, “I can’t wait to meet my kids!”

Roughly 60 educators held a silent protest outside the Papillion La-Vista school board meeting in Papillion, Nebraska on Monday, demanding a halt to the resumption of fully in-person instruction. At the board meeting, parents and educators spoke out in favor of online learning, with Dr. James Wilson, a biology professor, stating, “I have a four-year-old little girl and a 78-year-old pair of parents that I cannot go see starting tomorrow because I don’t know what’s going to happen.” Despite the outpouring of opposition, the board voted unanimously to resume in-person instruction, which began Tuesday and Wednesday.

In **Arkansas**, teachers protested against Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson’s plans to fully reopen even as the number of new COVID-19 cases and deaths have risen statewide over the past month. Dozens of protesters participated, holding signs that read, “The blood will be on Asa’s hands,” “Whose child has to die?” “I can teach from home. I can’t teach from a ventilator,” “School = super spreader event” and others.

The Fayetteville Education Association, a local affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), was compelled to organize the protest due to the immense opposition developing among educators in the state. In less than six weeks, the Facebook group Arkansans For Safe Public Schools has rapidly gained nearly 14,000 members.

In **Utah**, dozens of teachers protested the resumption of in-person learning in Alpine School District, the largest district, which has roughly 80,000 students. The district is located in Utah County, which currently has the highest rate of infections in the state. The guidelines adopted only mandate that a school closes when 15 or more positive cases are found.

With schools slated to resume in-person learning in Washoe County School District, in **Nevada**, over 100 educators, parents and students protested outside the district’s school board meeting Tuesday. High school teacher Debra Harris told the *Reno Gazette Journal*, “This is insane. This cannot be a safe condition during COVID.” She noted that professional development, which is usually focused on lesson planning, was now entirely about hygiene, commenting, “Nothing has been about education because that’s not what’s going to happen this year on campus.”

Facing immense pressure from educators, parents and students, Jefferson Parish Schools, the largest school district in **Louisiana** with some 50,000 students, was forced to delay the start of the school year by two weeks to August 26. Last week, hundreds protested at a school board meeting. With COVID-19 spreading rapidly throughout the state, nearly half of all students in the districts chose distance learning over in-person instruction.

Brian Williams J.D., a Jefferson Parish schoolteacher, spoke to the WSWs about the opposition to reopening. Describing the school board meeting, he said, “They are clueless about actual conditions on the ground. If they think school is safe, then they should put their jobs on the line, the way our lives are on the line. Promise us it’s safe by offering to resign if you’re wrong.”

Highlighting the connection between the back-to-school campaign and the back-to-work campaign, Williams said, “[These are] low-income, minority communities, essential workers. Jefferson Parish is the hottest spot for COVID-19 in all of Louisiana. Talking about reopening, the only thing you can figure

is, they’re so desperate for the children’s parents’ labor that they’re willing to risk our lives.”

While last week’s protest was partially organized by the Jefferson Federation of Teachers, the local teacher union, Williams expressed disappointment with their actions. He said they were “unmotivated, moving very slowly, very hesitantly” and not calling for a strike.

The above protests are a small fraction of the dozens and possibly hundreds that have taken place across the country in recent weeks, in nearly every state.

The central task facing educators is to develop fighting organizations to connect their disparate struggles and prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the drive to reopen schools. This can only be done independently of the procorporate American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which have rejected the widely supported call for a nationwide strike.

The initiative and active struggle of educators, parents and students must be expanded and deepened as widely as possible. To organize and coordinate these struggles, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon all those opposed to the deadly reopening of schools to form a network of interconnected rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood.

These committees must establish connections with the broadest sections of the working class—manufacturing, logistics, health care, transit and other workers—to prepare a common fight against both corporate-controlled parties, which intend to use all forms of intimidation and state repression to force teachers back into the classrooms, regardless of the human toll.

The fight to stop the reopening of the schools will require the political mobilization of the entire working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. Instead of squandering trillions on Wall Street and the Pentagon war machine, the working class must ensure that the resources are made available to provide state-of-the-art online learning for all students, the payment of full wages to parents who must care for their children, free and universal health care and a massive program of regular testing and contact tracing, which is the only way to contain the deadly virus.

We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to contact us today and follow developments through the *WSWS Educators Newsletter*.



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