

Prepare a nationwide general strike to stop the deadly reopening of schools!

Form independent rank-and-file safety committees of educators, parents and students!

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
15 August 2020

The following statement has been released by the newly formed Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the US. Join the committee now at wsws.org/edsafety. You can also follow us on Facebook.

The drive to reopen schools amidst the expanding coronavirus pandemic threatens the health and lives of millions of children, educators, parents, grandparents and community members.

Dozens of school districts have resumed in-person instruction. Within days, there have already been outbreaks of COVID-19 infections in Georgia, Delaware, Louisiana, Alabama, Hawaii, California and other states, forcing thousands of children and school workers to quarantine.

A catastrophe is being prepared, with millions more students slated to return to classrooms in the coming days and weeks. This includes New York City, the nation's largest school district with 1.1 million students and 135,000 teachers and support staff.

Whether it is Trump, Betsy DeVos and Florida Governor DeSantis or Democrats like Biden and New York Governor Cuomo, all back this reopening of the schools despite the warnings of scientists and public health experts and polls showing that 59 percent of voters oppose fully reopening K-12 schools. This is not because these corporate-controlled politicians who have spent their entire careers slashing school funding and privatizing public education have suddenly become concerned with the academic, social and emotional needs of children.

On the contrary, they have only one purpose: to get children out of their homes so their parents can be sent back to work to produce profits for the corporate and financial elites. Having handed Wall Street a multi-trillion-dollar bailout, the Democrats and Republicans want to force workers to pay for it no matter how many must die.

Educators, parents and students are determined to stop this madness. Hundreds of thousands of people from nearly every state in the US, along with multiple countries around the world, have joined Facebook groups opposed to reopening schools. More than 100 protests and car caravans were organized across the US in recent weeks.

Teachers, school workers, parents, students and others from across the US are taking the initiative to form the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Our purpose is to unite educators with young people, parents and the entire working class to oppose the reopening of schools and the social interests driving this homicidal policy.

Workers first of all need the scientific facts to counter the misinformation and lies peddled by the politicians and corporate media.

The campaign to reopen schools is predicated on three basic lies.

Lie #1: Children are less susceptible to infection and don't develop serious symptoms from COVID-19

Nearly 180,000 cases of COVID-19 were reported in children between July 9 to August 6. This is a 90 percent increase in total cases among children in just four weeks. Nearly 100,000 children in the US tested positive for COVID-19 in just the last two weeks of July, according to a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Children were 0.5 to 5.3 percent of total reported hospitalizations, depending on the state and age.

When children are hospitalized, one in three need the ICU, which is as often as adults. Six percent of these need ventilators. Since May, at least 90 children have died from COVID-19 across the US, many with no preexisting conditions.

Lie #2: Children rarely transmit COVID-19

Recent, comprehensive studies with large sample sizes conducted in the US, Italy and South Korea each concluded that children transmit COVID-19 more readily than adults. One of the studies, from Chicago, found that babies and young children infected with the virus can carry viral loads in their throats and airways up to 100 times greater than adults. The spread of the deadly disease in Israel has been largely attributed to the reopening of schools.

Lie #3: Schools can be reopened "safely"

A recent study from the University of Florida confirmed that an infective aerosolized form of minute COVID-19 particles can become airborne and travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the recommended six feet for social distancing. These aerosols can also remain suspended in the air for hours in poorly ventilated spaces.

As a result, every school bus and classroom will become a dangerous confined setting even with temperature screenings, masks and efforts to social distance. 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, involving a total of 36,000 school buildings.

All of the latest science makes clear that reopening schools will be an unmitigated catastrophe. Last month, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany succinctly presented the outlook of the ruling class toward the pandemic when she declared that "science should not stand in the way" of the drive to reopen schools.

Obsessed solely with the impact of the pandemic on the stock market, Trump and state Democrats and Republicans did nothing as the deadly

virus spread in early March. Only the collective action of workers, including a series of wildcat strikes in defiance of the unions launched by autoworkers, meatpackers, logistics workers and others, along with demands by New York City teachers to close the schools, led to the official statewide lockdowns. It has been proven that this saved tens of thousands of lives.

Once again, it is up to the working class to take emergency action. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unite all workers—educators, school bus drivers, janitors, maintenance workers and other support staff, with manufacturing, health care, logistics, grocery and food processing, retail and restaurant workers—to carry out a nationwide general strike to prevent the reopening of schools and save lives.

In waging this struggle, we adopt the following demands which we urge all workers to fight for:

- **For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools!** This is non-negotiable. It is impossible to “safely” open schools during a raging pandemic. The loss of life and the permanent physical and emotional damage to children who spread the disease to teachers, parents and grandparents dwarfs any disruption caused by online learning.

- **Full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction!** The trillions handed over to the rich must be redistributed to provide universal access to high-speed internet, food security, mental health care, special education support and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning for every student and educator. These programs must be expedited in rural areas, Native American reservations and the most impoverished working-class neighborhoods, which the ruling class has left to rot for decades.

- **Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children!** Educators are not oblivious to the needs of parents, as the corporate-controlled politicians are. That is why the money handed over to the rich must be used to provide full income to those who cannot work because they must stay home with their children. At the same time, full unemployment benefits must be restored and funding increased to protect families, and a permanent moratorium put in place to stop all evictions and home foreclosures.

- **No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home!** Teachers and education workers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions must be provided with full income and benefits for the duration of the pandemic, not fined and penalized. Nearly 1.5 million teachers, or one in four, have a condition that puts them at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

- **For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers!** All those who speak out against unsafe working conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against any victimization by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay.

- **Halt all nonessential production!** Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

The schools must remain closed until the threat to public health is over

and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees. This will only happen after a massive program of testing and contact tracing can show that positivity rates nationally are less than 0.1 percent. Before any school reopens under these conditions, all ventilation systems must be modernized, janitorial and nursing staff must be fully funded, and class sizes must be permanently reduced to no more than 15 students.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is completely independent of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and other unions, which do not represent the working class. The AFT and NEA are collaborating with the Democratic Party to perpetuate the lie that schools can be reopened safely. In cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and in other major urban areas, the unions have reached deals with local Democrats to start the semester with online learning only. But this is only a maneuver to dissipate popular opposition and give them more time to prepare a full reopening.

The central lesson of the 2018–19 wave of wildcat strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states, along with the strikes in Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago, is that it is essential that teachers must rely on their own independent strength to fight.

The unprecedented catastrophe of the pandemic is fundamentally a social and political, not simply a medical, question. The technology and medical expertise exist to contain the virus and ensure the safety of the entire working class, but under capitalism everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

Since the pandemic began, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Tesla boss Elon Musk and the rest of America’s billionaires have seen their collective wealth rise by nearly \$600 billion. While the Democrats and Republicans have handed trillions to the financial oligarchy, they have cut the \$600 a week unemployment subsidy and have left states with a school funding deficit of roughly \$300 billion. This will be used to accelerate the attack on teachers, the shuttering of schools, the transfer of public assets to charter and private schools and other for-profit schemes.

Our demands are based not on what the corporations and the politicians claim is affordable but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, educators and the entire working class. In launching the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, we aim to mobilize the working class as an independent social force against the unsafe reopening of schools and for the defense of public education.

All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should join the committee, join our Facebook page and contact us today to establish local rank-and-file committees in your school and neighborhood. Send us any pertinent information, including significant developments in your district or state, and we will share this widely with a global audience.

We will be hosting a national call-in meeting at 3:00 p.m. EDT (12:00 p.m. PDT) on Saturday, August 22, to discuss developments and the way forward. We urge you to make plans today to attend this vital meeting.



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wsws.org/contact