

Teacher sickout closes Arizona school district as support grows for national strike

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Phoenix, Arizona area teachers and support staff organized a sickout today, forcing the cancellation of the first day of in-person classes scheduled by the J.O. Combs Unified School District, about 50 miles southeast of the state capital. The job action is part of the growing resistance by educators and momentum towards a nationwide strike to stop the unsafe reopening of schools as the pandemic continues to rage across the United States.

As of Friday, 109 out of the 600 teachers and other school employees in the Phoenix suburb had called in sick, defying the school board's insistence that they physically return to work, even though the area is a COVID-19 hotspot. All classes, including virtual learning, were cancelled until further notice due to "insufficient staffing levels," which were the result of a "high volume of staff absences, citing health and safety concerns."

Officials in the adjacent Queen Creek school district, also located in the San Tan Valley, provocatively ordered teachers to come into school buildings on Monday to conduct online classes despite teachers' insistence that they could conduct virtual teaching just as easily and far more safely from home. In response, dozens of Queen Creek teachers resigned.

Schools are being reopened even though the two districts do not meet the criteria for a safe resumption of schooling set by the Arizona Department of Health Services. In fact, there is not a single district in the state that meets the requirements of a two-week decline in the rate of new cases below 100 per 100,000 per week, an infection rate below seven percent for two weeks and hospitalization rate that remains below 10 percent for two weeks. The state reported 800 new cases and 14 deaths on Sunday, bringing the total to 193,537 infections and 4,506 deaths. Currently, Arizona has an eight percent infection rate and 80 percent of ICU beds are still filled.

Last week, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, a close ally of President Trump, reiterated his demand that schools reopen by August 17, in violation of his administration's own safety requirements. In an effort to provide himself with a cover for this homicidal policy, Ducey said officials in each district should decide how to reopen. The logic of this was on display last week, when a school board member in Lake Havasu declared, "At some point, we are going to have to come up with

an acceptable casualty rate, and nobody wants to have that conversation."

Arizona teachers, who carried out a powerful wildcat strike across the state in 2018, are once again coming to the forefront of the struggle. "I would like a general strike," Laura, a Phoenix teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Teachers have families and don't want to bring this disease home. I have diabetes and I'm high risk. I don't want to get sick.

"Sure, education is going to suffer without in-person learning, but until we get this under control, people are going to die if the schools are reopened. They know people are going to die, but they don't care.

"We have to put our foot down and hold a nationwide strike. We can't put ourselves, our children and our families at risk. Would you rather live and temporarily postpone your education or go to school and die? If it's a choice between going back to school or living, I'll live, thank you very much."

"We've already had teachers in Arizona die," Laura continued, pointing to the case of Kimberley Chavez Lopez Byrd, a 61-year-old first grade teacher from Hayden-Winkelman Unified School District, a small rural district southeast of Phoenix, who died on June 26. Ms. Byrd and two other teachers contracted the disease while delivering online summer school lessons from the same classroom, although they social distanced and followed other safety precautions.

"Ducey is saying it is up to the districts," she added, "but they are threatening the ones that don't reopen. 'If you don't take the kids,' they say, 'we'll give the parents vouchers to send their kids to private schools that will open.' At the same time, they are putting pressure on single moms and parents who have to go to work and can't afford child care. They say you can't be evicted, but people are being evicted left and right here. Parents should get their full income to stay home, or older kids could be paid to help their younger siblings get online for virtual learning. We can do this if we want to save lives."

Like Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, Arizona Governor Ducey is claiming that the sole reason for opening the schools is to address the educational and emotional needs of students. This is a fraud. Since 2009, Republicans and Democrats in Arizona have cut \$4.56 billion from public schools, while handing billions in tax cuts to corporations,

including the giant copper companies that dominate the state. Even deeper cuts are now on the way due to the pandemic-driven economic crisis.

The deadly drive to open the schools is a bipartisan policy whose sole purpose is to get parents back to work in order to pay off the trillions handed over to Wall Street and the corporations through the bipartisan CARES Act.

The decision by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to fully open New York City schools for 1.1 million students and 135,000 teachers and support staff by September 10 is provoking enormous outrage in that city, which has already lost more than 23,000 people to COVID-19. Both officials, working in conjunction with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, kept schools open until protests by teachers forced their closure in mid-March, a delay that cost 50 school workers, including 21 teachers, and countless others their lives.

Far from opposing the reckless reopening of the schools, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the national parent union of the UFT, and the National Education Association (NEA) are doing everything in their power to block the growing movement for a nationwide strike. Instead, the top officials of the AFT and NEA are attending the Democratic National Convention this week as delegates to promote Biden, who oversaw the attacks on teachers during the Obama administration and is now peddling the lie that schools can be reopened “safely” in collaboration with the unions. Democratic officials in several urban districts such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston have made deals with the unions to start the school year with remote learning only, but this is only to dissipate anger and prepare for full reopening.

Over the last several weeks, there have been hundreds of protests by teachers, parents and students against unsafe conditions. Thousands have posted articles and comments on Facebook pages that have emerged to exchange information and organize opposition.

In recent days, protests have occurred in several cities, including:

* Bridgeport, Connecticut, where dozens of teachers rallied at a school board meeting last Thursday.

* Boston, Massachusetts, where hundreds protested last week and the school board announced it would delay the September 10 start of the school year.

* Florida, where teachers in Osseo and Santa Rosa County protested Thursday and Friday against unsafe conditions and teacher layoffs. Teachers say the hybrid model of both in-person and online learning puts them at higher risk for contracting COVID-19. “Schools shouldn’t be completely open until the data matches up with it being safe,” said Lindsey Burdick, a teacher at Park Center Senior High. “We shouldn’t have to deal with ‘safe enough’ conditions. The numbers aren’t there yet. It’s not low enough.”

Teachers at the Florida A&M University Developmental

Research School also held an online protest against the planned restart of in-person instruction on August 19, forcing a delay to August 31.

* Fulton County, Georgia, where teachers protested orders that they report to classrooms to give online instruction.

* Sylvania, Ohio, where teachers protested the layoff of art, music and other instructors

This growing opposition to unsafe conditions and budget cuts must be united and developed into a powerful movement for a nationwide strike to halt the opening of the schools.

This is why teachers, parents and students from across the US formed the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite educators, independently of the unions, to mobilize the broadest support throughout the entire working class. In a statement issued last week, the safety committee called for a general strike to demand the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools, full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction, and full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home. To pay for this, the committee calls for the redirection of the trillions handed over to Wall Street and the corporations.

*All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should **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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