

“Teachers want to strike, but the unions are doing nothing”

## “Refuse to Return” Facebook group cofounder describes explosion of opposition to unsafe school openings

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“No teacher signed up for this,” Tracy Campbell, a 35-year veteran music teacher from Colorado, told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the demand that educators return to the classroom in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. “The part that is left out in the news coverage is that teachers weren’t asked.

“Why weren’t the unions organizing in March? If they were strong, we wouldn’t have to do this organizing,” she said, explaining why she and several others set up an independent Facebook group, “Colorado Schools for Safe Openings-14 Days No New Cases.”

Their “Refuse to Return” group has attracted 9,469 members and helped inspire at least 35 other groups across the US, including in Illinois (32,555 members), Indiana (13,392 members), Oregon (13,565 members), Tennessee (6,133 members), Pennsylvania (7,831 members), Mississippi (2,210 members) and more.

Social media opposition has erupted nationally, while educators have mounted protests, petitions and sickouts to oppose the ruling-class campaign to reopen schools. The Facebook groups opposed to this homicidal campaign have become centers for organizing protests, sharing scientific and political developments, venting anxiety and frustration, and increasingly for discussing local, statewide and national strike action to halt the reopening of schools.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was launched on August 15 to unify educators, school workers, parents and students independently of the unions to oppose the forced return to work and school by the Democrats and Republicans.

The statement that accompanied the announcement called for a nationwide general strike, emphasizing, “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.”

Unlike any of the mainstream media outlets, the WSWs has closely covered the explosion of opposition on social media. Having seen one of our articles, Tracy contacted us in order to tell her story. She has been a music teacher for 35 years, and lives near the Navajo Nation reservations that have been devastated by COVID-19.

Like other educators, Tracy has carefully followed the science of the pandemic and has been acutely aware of the immense dangers posed by the reopening of schools. When she was asked to return for in-person instruction at her school, she refused. “I decided not to take any contract teaching jobs this year, since I have grandsons and my health is more important,” she told the WSWs.

Tracy taught during a time when public education was under a continual assault by both corporate-controlled parties, with per-pupil funding declining, class sizes skyrocketing, and school buildings left to decay. “The treatment of teachers has just been going down, down, down,” Tracy said. “All electives are getting the short stick. I had to fight for my program my entire life as a band director. It was always on the chopping block.”

Commenting on the pandemic and the drive to reopen schools, Tracy stated, “The Democratic governor here, Jared Polis, said ‘it’s up to local control’ whether or not to do in-person learning, which is just giving power to these little Betsy DeVos forces in small rural areas. School districts have given *carte blanche* to these people who think it’s all a hoax and are now starting schools. This is exactly what Betsy DeVos wanted, to dismantle the whole public education system.”

As a result, “people are resigning left and right. They’re telling band teachers they have to teach in person, with kids blowing into instruments. It’s crazy!”

Tracy noted that since the start of the pandemic, “teachers have been freaking out,” adding, “if they’d organized online learning we could’ve had mobile computer labs for hard-hit places. Why aren’t they asking experts to come up with solutions?”

She noted that in her district and across the US, the pandemic has worsened conditions that were already terrible for working-class and impoverished communities. “I lost six students one year that I was teaching on the reservation. Six were killed or died in car wrecks, and it’s really hard on the kids.

“I think the pandemic is waking people up. We better learn fast how to organize, because what’s at stake is not only the emotional well-being of our children. We understand there’s problems with remote learning. But going remote is temporary, death is not temporary. We’ll be creating more trauma for kids if we reopen schools.”

Tracy said that since she no longer had a full-time teaching position, “I realized I had the freedom to organize without fear of retaliation, which had always been an issue for me because I didn’t want to lose my job.” She reached out to two other teachers and they decided to begin organizing opposition to the reopening of schools. “We said that we can’t just sit around complaining on Facebook,” Tracy noted.

“We decided to start these Facebook groups because there wasn’t much then. As the weeks went on, it was crazy, because our groups kept growing. The other administrators of our Colorado Facebook group were very helpful and active. We began finding other groups that weren’t associated with us, then reaching out to other places like Iowa, Mississippi and more. It caught on like fire. There were so many teachers that didn’t have any union support. Little by little, people have been sharing their really raw emotions and fears.

“We started planning collective actions, doing phone calling, car caravans. I’m a big proponent of protest art, so I told everyone we should start doing art installations outside our buildings. In Tennessee, they did ones, in Little Rock too. Grim reapers started showing up at protests in Colorado and all over.”

Tracy noted that the groups are meant “not only to be a support system, but a way for teachers to communicate safely. I started getting hate mail sent to me. They said, ‘Do you know your Facebook profile will be with you forever?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, and I want my grandkids to know that I fought against this.’ It’s really been grassroots, and crosses party lines.”

Pointing to the widespread self-sacrifice and concern over social issues among teachers, Tracy stated, “You don’t have to be socialist to be a teacher, but we pretty much are.” An

important motivating factor that led Tracy and others to form the Facebook groups was the complete absence of any broader organizing by the teacher unions. While there is growing support for a nationwide strike against reopening schools, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which have long colluded with the austerity program of the two big-business parties, are opposed to collective action and instead are facilitating the reopening of schools by isolating educators district by district.

Tracy noted that the unions supposedly representing custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and other school workers are also doing nothing to protect them. She said, “We’re talking about everyone in our schools, their unions aren’t being effective for them either. Custodians here almost walked out of their meeting recently; they’ve had to work in unsafe conditions during summer school.”

Tracy expressed her support for the recently formed Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. She said, “I’d love to help with this in any way I can; I’d like to help form a rank-and-file committee here. I think a nationwide strike would be great. This last week before school starts here, I’m doing all I can on the ground. These teachers are going in, and they’re coming out saying half the staff wasn’t wearing masks. Teachers want to strike, but the unions are doing nothing. Even in Florida, they filed this lawsuit, but teachers are still going into classrooms this week.”

“Reaching across to other workers is really important; I tell my group that too. We’ve got to get with our villages and communities.”

*All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee 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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