

New York and Los Angeles plan deadly reopening of schools

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With teachers, parents and students protesting the reckless reopening of schools across the country, opposition has become increasingly intense in New York City, the nation's largest school district, where Mayor Bill de Blasio is pushing to restart in-person classes by September 10. The move, which has the backing of Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo, affects 1.1 million students and more than 135,000 teachers and support staff.

Cuomo spoke at the first night of the Democratic National Convention last night, presenting himself as the polar opposite to Donald Trump when it comes to his response to the pandemic. However, he has green-lighted the opening of schools throughout the state, along with New York City, which has already lost more than 23,000 people to COVID-19. Both Cuomo and de Blasio, working in conjunction with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, resisted demands by teachers to close schools earlier this year and only closed them in mid-March. The delay cost the lives of 79 school workers, including 31 teachers, and led to a vast spread of the pandemic throughout the city.

De Blasio announced at a press conference Monday that New York City schools were ready to resume in-person instruction in less than a month. Citing the questionable results from a parent survey, the mayor claimed that 26 percent of parents, over 250,000, opted for fully-online learning for their children. He claimed that 74 percent of the parents surveyed had supported some type of in-person instruction. This means 700,000 students will be herded into dilapidated and poorly ventilated classrooms as part of a hybrid system that alternates between classroom and distance learning from one to three days per week.

The actual number of parents who responded was not released and those who did not complete the online survey were by default registered for the school's hybrid program, which entails partial in-person instruction. Moreover, if large number of parents reluctantly accepted some in-school learning, that is primarily because they could not afford childcare or would be fired if they stayed home from work.

Richard Carranza, Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, said 85 percent of teachers have signed up to teach under the so-called hybrid plan, while approximately 15 percent of city teachers—nearly 12,000—sought medical COVID-19 exemptions to work from home only. But these figures are just as deceptive.

According to the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) web site, only those teachers considered to be high-risk by the CDC guidelines will be offered the remote learning only option. “Reasonable accommodations may only be granted for an employee's own disability,” the site notes, adding, “school staff who are unable to work at a school or DOE [Department of Education] site for other non-disability reasons (e.g. childcare, health of others in their household) may seek other options, such as leaves, but are not eligible for a reasonable accommodation to work remotely.”

Facing widespread opposition from educators, the UFT, the principals' union and other support staff unions have issued toothless appeals to de Blasio for reopening delays and “safe practices and training.” At the same time, they have opposed growing demands for strike action to oppose this homicidal policy.

In an attempt to divide teachers and staff across the city's 1,400 schools, the district and the unions are implementing school-by-school plans. At the same time, Carranza announced Monday that students could be taught by teachers from other schools during remote classes because splitting up classes to enable social distancing would lead to a teacher shortage.

In the face of popular opposition in the country's second largest school district, officials from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) announced plans Sunday for implementing a limited testing and contact tracing program for all students and staff. Currently, classes will begin August 31 under a fully-online instruction model, and a date for return to in-person instruction is still to be determined.

The announcement by LAUSD School Superintendent Austin Beutner is aimed at mollifying anger and concerns

and to prepare for the full reopening of the schools for 735,000 students and 60,000 teachers and support staff. Under the plan, the district aims to test all students and staff in the coming weeks “to develop a baseline.” No details have been announced as to the frequency and strategy of testing and contact tracing to follow under this program.

Beutner, who has championed school privatization and provoked a weeklong teacher strike last year, said he would lead the initiative with Arne Duncan, who as the Secretary of Education in the Obama administration oversaw a vast expansion of charter schools across the US. Overseeing the testing will be a task force of epidemiologists, analysts and other experts from the University of California, Los Angeles; Johns Hopkins University; Stanford University; Microsoft; and the insurers Anthem Blue Cross and Health Net.

“Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures... it will get [students] back to school sooner and safer and keep them there,” Beutner said, adding that the goal was to make the program a national model.

It is clear, however, that the program will not involve daily testing with immediate results, which have been made available to NBA athletes as well as to White House staff and the super-rich. Without frequent testing with immediate results, any serious contact tracing is impossible. But the state, which is home to 167 billionaires, including Tesla CEO Elon Musk—whose net worth has tripled during the course of the pandemic to \$75 billion—will do nothing to marshal the resources necessary for a real testing program.

The Los Angeles area has the highest infection rate in California, and the reopening of the schools will lead to a disaster. But herding children back into the classrooms is necessary to force workers back into unsafe factories like Tesla’s in order to produce the profits needed to pay off the massive bailout of Wall Street that has inflated the value of the shares held by Musk and other billionaires.

The fact that the reopening drives are being pushed so aggressively in two of the largest and most powerful Democratic Party-controlled cities is not an act of chance. Cuomo and California Governor Gavin Newsom are just as determined to defend the interests of the corporate and financial elite as Trump and the Republicans. The Democrats, however, work more closely with the teacher unions, which have spent decades betraying teachers and imposing the austerity program of the ruling class.

After selling out last year’s teachers strike and paving the way for more budget cuts and school privatization, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which is affiliated with both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), is now colluding with the plans to reopen the schools. Meanwhile, the unions

are promoting the lie that the election of Biden will protect educators, even though Biden presided over an unprecedented assault on public education throughout the eight years of the Obama administration.

As the two largest school districts in the US push to resume in-person instruction, new outbreaks have been reported in districts across the country that have already reopened. As cases have popped up, countless students and staff have been quarantined in over a dozen states, including Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Indiana, Arizona, California, and Hawaii, among many others.

Teachers across the US are taking action, including in Arizona where Phoenix area teachers staged a sickout Monday forcing the closure of schools. A teacher in the nearby Queen Creek district told the WSWS, “Lives are more important than temporary disappointment for students. This vitriol should be directed at the districts that are trying to reopen without being fully prepared, and without providing equitable options to both high-risk educators AND students. We can’t blame the educators, because they are not obligated to risk their lives.”

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 of dollars 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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