

# Detroit teachers vote overwhelmingly to strike against unsafe school openings

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On Wednesday, Detroit educators voted by a margin of 91-9 percent to authorize the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) to call a “safety strike” to block plans by the district to start in-person teaching when schools reopen on September 8. The overwhelming vote is another expression of popular opposition to the unsafe opening of schools, which includes sickouts by Phoenix area teachers and an explosion of social media groups that have organized protests across the country.

The DFT only called the strike vote out of concern that there would be a revolt by educators, parents and students against the plans Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to open the largest school district in the state, which was an earlier epicenter of the deadly COVID-19 virus. Workers throughout the city know that herding 55,000 students and more than 4,000 school employees into dilapidated and poorly ventilated school buildings will lead to a resurgence of virus.

In a district email earlier this month Nikolai Vitti, former superintendent of Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida, revealed that some 80 percent of parents are opposed to in-person learning. On August 13, there was a three-month high of infections, with 1,138 new cases. As of Wednesday afternoon, there have been at least 103,527 cases and 6,607 deaths in Michigan.

Under these conditions, the DFT hopes that the strike vote will allow the union to get ahead of the demands by teachers for a nation-wide strike in order to contain and strangle it. In the meantime, DFT officials are working out plans with district officials to create conditions to fully reopen the schools.

In a statement released to union members before the vote, the DFT made it clear that the action it was proposing was “not a strike in the traditional sense.” Instead, it stated “we are ready, willing and able to continue work remotely.” The action, the statement said, was to convince the school board to start the year remotely” and “develop a new reopening plan with the union.” It adds that the school board should “wait to transition back to in-person instruction until it is safe, as demonstrated by various indicators.” The final decision on when schools are safe will be left entirely up to Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who violated her own safety protocols to reopen businesses, including the auto industry.

At their biennial convention held online last month, officials from the DFT’s parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), paid lip service to the “safe reopening of the schools,” while making clear their determined opposition to a nation-wide strike to stop the reckless opening of the schools. Instead, the resolution stated, AFT locals “will use every action and tool available to us from serving on state and local reopening committees to filing grievances, lawsuits and other actions against unsafe and unsound plans or the faulty implementation of plans.” The union would only support “local and/or state affiliate safety strikes on a case-by-case basis as a last resort,” the resolution stated.

During the online strike vote Wednesday afternoon, AFT President Randi Weingarten reiterated the point that a “safety strike” would be a “last resort.” Finally, the DFT has made it clear that the strike vote was not binding, declaring instead that “the DFT Executive Board will decide and communicate with members.”

Earlier this month, the Chicago Teachers Union carried out a similar maneuver, threatening to call a strike vote before it worked out a deal with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to start the school year with remote learning. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers, which colluded with Mayor Bill de Blasio to conceal the spread of the virus and keep schools open in March, is now making noises about a “safety strike” to press for remote learning. In every case, such deals with Democrats in Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia and other cities are aimed at dissipating popular opposition and giving the authorities and the union executives time to create conditions to get teachers back into the classrooms.

The restarting of in-person teaching is particularly critical for the auto industry which dominates Detroit and the state of Michigan. The auto industry has had high absenteeism due to the spread of COVID-19 and parents who want to stay at home to care for their children.

At a virtual “School Board Meeting” on Tuesday teachers and parents denounced plans to end students back into schools. Donna Stern, a lifelong Detroit resident and graduate of local schools, said, “I believe it is ridiculous to be peddling lies about how you can make it safe in Detroit schools during a pandemic. During the best of times in my daughter’s school there was no

soap and toilet paper and we have no reason to believe that will change now.” She denounced the photo op by Superintendent Vitti who wore a surgical mask during a news interview, saying mask wearing and social distancing were fine when the cameras were rolling. But it is impossible to do that on a normal school day. “You are condemning people to die if you open the schools,” she said.

Regina Weiss, a Detroit teacher pointed out that buildings do not have proper ventilation. She said there should be no return to school until there were “No new cases for fourteen days, or until we improve the infrastructure of the buildings with the necessary ventilation.” Instead of in-person instruction, she said, time and energy should be used to make virtual learning the best possible experience for everyone.

Another teacher, Brenda Ryan, that no one should go into the school buildings. Every adult who enter the buildings, “All have lives that matter.” She yielded her remaining time to play a powerful audio clip by Dr. Hildreth who pointed to the new study from the University of Florida that found that airborne particles of COVID-19 remain in the air for hours and travel far longer distances than the six-foot social distancing protocol. “What makes us think you can open a school where the ventilation is poor and HVAC systems are outdated?”, Ryan asked.

Other parents pointed to the lead in school water systems and the lack of maintenance, adding that they did not trust the school board to protect their children. Speaking bluntly, another speaker asked, “What is the protocol for when a student or staff member dies from COVID-19? How will DPSCD respond to the inevitable death of a student or staff member?” The school board moderator replied with callousness, saying, “Unfortunately, the District deals with deaths within our school community on annual basis. We will follow established protocols for handling such a situation.”

Teachers also want to defend paraprofessionals, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Counselors and Social Workers who are expected to work face-to-face with children in the buildings. Vitti has insisted that “Paraeducators cannot have a full day online at home.” These poorly paid workers, making as little as \$10 per hour, have been completely abandoned by the DFT and are expected to work in buildings with students in “Learning Centers” to get them online and to monitor their virtual instruction as though the students were at home.

Fearing that the union could lose control of the situation, both AFT Michigan President David Hecker and AFT President Randi Weingarten attended the online strike vote. The last time Weingarten was in Detroit was to push through the bankruptcy restructuring of the schools in 2015-2016. This followed the wave of wildcat sickouts by Detroit teachers that were the precursor to the 2018-19 strike wave, which began in West Virginia and involved more than 700,000 teachers. During that time, Weingarten traveled the country to prevent the wildcat strikes from coalescing into a national strike against the

bipartisan assault on public education.

A leading member of the Democratic National Committee, Weingarten is peddling the lie that a Biden presidency will defend the interests of teachers and lead to rational solution to the public health disaster. In fact, Biden oversaw the attack on teachers under the Obama administration following the 2008 financial crash and is preparing even deeper attacks on public education in order to pay for the enormous growth of debt from the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street contained in the bipartisan CARES Act.

The opposition of educators, parents and students to the unsafe reopening of schools and the new wave of budget cuts must be united. This is why teachers, parents and students from across the US have formed the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite independently of the unions and 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 the super-rich.

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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