

Trump administration brands educators “critical infrastructure workers” to force schools to open

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21 August 2020

In a major escalation of the campaign to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration released new guidelines Tuesday branding educators “critical infrastructure workers.” In doing so, Trump made clear his willingness to bring the full force of the state against the mounting opposition to the unsafe opening of schools.

The guidelines—issued by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), a subdivision of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—enable districts to prevent educators who have come into contact with someone known to have tested positive for COVID-19 from going into quarantine to protect themselves and prevent further community spread. In effect, Trump has codified the “herd immunity” strategy of the ruling class into official policy, deliberately flouting the most basic public health protocols in order to let the virus rip through the population and infect as many as possible.

In an interview with Fox News Thursday, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany stated, “Look, we believe teachers are essential workers,” adding that “meatpackers didn’t stop working during this pandemic... Nor should our teachers, because America’s children must come first.”

The comparison with meatpackers is apt. In April, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to force resistant meatpackers back into the plants, where close quarters and poor air circulation rapidly spread the virus, infecting thousands and killing at least 65 workers. The conditions facing teachers are now the same, with overcrowded classrooms and antiquated ventilation systems setting the stage for a rapid spread of the virus throughout every school and community.

Trump’s move comes in response to the intense opposition of educators, parents and students to the catastrophic reopening of schools, which has already infected over 2,500 students and staff at hundreds of schools in at least 44 states across the country. There have been well over 100 protests in the past six weeks, a district-wide sickout in Arizona this week, and a continual outpouring of criticism on social media, with the majority of the population firmly opposed to in-person learning.

On Wednesday, 91 percent of Detroit teachers voted to authorize a safety strike to prevent the reopening of schools,

and across the US there is growing support for nationwide strike action. The most politically conscious section of educators have formed the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which within a week has received wide support and an enthusiastic response to its founding statement that calls for the building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to prepare for a general strike to stop school openings.

The CISA guidelines follow similar diktats issued by local officials in Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina. Trump’s Republican allies that have demanded the full resumption of in-person learning, such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, and others, will now be emboldened to escalate this campaign, knowing they’ve been granted *carte blanche* to use their repressive state apparatus to force educators back in the schools.

While the Republicans are most brutally conducting this campaign, the Democrats are equally beholden to Wall Street and are pushing for the full reopening of schools, in order to force parents back to work producing profits.

The issuance of the guidelines coincides with the Democratic National Convention (DNC), which, under a Biden-Harris administration, would accelerate imperialist militarism around the world and class war at home.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* published Wednesday, Biden advisor Ted Kaufman made it clear Biden would impose deep austerity against the working class, including the further gutting of education spending. “When we get in, the pantry is going to be bare. When you see what Trump’s done to the deficit,” he said, “we’re going to be limited.”

Biden, along with Democrats at every level and their backers in the teacher unions claim that schools can be reopened “safely” during the pandemic, with minimal personal protective equipment (PPE), and unspecified testing and contact tracing programs.

In her speech to the Democratic convention, Jill Biden gave voice to the bipartisan character of the drive to reopen schools,

saying, “So many classrooms are quiet right now, the playgrounds are still. But if you listen closely, you can hear the sparks of change in the air. Across this country, educators, parents, first responders, Americans of all walks of life, are putting their shoulders back, fighting for each other... With Joe as president, these classrooms will ring out with laughter and possibility once again.”

The Biden-Harris campaign website states that reopening schools “should be a top national priority,” while providing no scientific guidelines for how this should be done, effectively pursuing the same policy as Trump.

The chief allies of the Democratic Party in the campaign to reopen schools are the teacher unions and their defenders in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations whose members have obtained top positions in the union apparatus in Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten concealed the danger to teachers by downplaying the new CISA guidelines, and then reiterated the lie that schools can be reopened safely simply with more PPE. “If the president really saw us as essential, he’d act like it... Teachers are and always have been essential workers—but not essential enough, it seems, for the Trump administration to commit the resources necessary to keep them safe in the classroom.” Similarly downplaying the threat to educators, outgoing National Education Association (NEA) President Lily Eskelsen Garcia characterized the guidelines as a “rhetorical gambit.”

With infections mounting daily among students and educators, both union heads adamantly oppose the mobilization of educators in a nationwide struggle, well aware that this would lead to a direct political confrontation not only with Trump and the Republicans but the union-aligned Democrats.

With the sanctioning of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who is allowing all schools to reopen statewide, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is pressing to reopen the city’s schools under the equally unsafe “hybrid” model. The aim is to set a precedent in the largest school district in the US, to allow Democratic politicians across the country to reopen their schools.

Each day, there is growing anger and resentment among city educators, which threatens to erupt outside the control of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). In response, UFT President Michael Mulgrew on Wednesday floated the idea of a strike by the city’s 120,000 teachers and staff members. Mulgrew’s posturing is meant to cover up the fact that the UFT already has blood on its hands by keeping schools open in early March as the virus spread, ultimately killing at least 74 educators.

After privately negotiating with city officials for weeks, Mulgrew suddenly demanded that students and teachers be tested for COVID-19 within 10 days of reopening schools, and then monthly after that. These measures, even if implemented, would do little to stop the spread of infection and death. The

union issued a three-page checklist that is full of loopholes, including repeatedly demanding that rooms be “properly ventilated” without specifying at all what this means.

For its part, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) caucus of the UFT issued a statement “welcoming” Mulgrew’s announcement, and adding, “We appreciate that he echoed many of the demands we have been articulating since May and are proud that our advocacy helped push UFT leadership to take a stronger stance against the Mayor’s inequitable, unsafe plan.”

The various “radical” factions of the unions that are tied to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations are peddling the lie that the unions can be pushed to the left if only enough pressure is applied from below. But the AFT and NEA are not genuine workers’ organizations subject to the pressure of their members. They are corporatist syndicates that have spent decades imposing austerity and selling out struggles, including during the 2018-19 strike wave, and they are thoroughly integrated into the state.

The schools can be kept closed and lives saved but only through the independent intervention of the working class. To fight for this, educators, parents and students must take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, in every school and community. These committees must appeal to and unite with every section of workers—manufacturing, logistics, food-processing, health care, public and private sector—to prepare a general strike.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will serve as a national coordinating body for this work, and all those seeking to carry out a genuine struggle should contact the committee today.

The committee is hosting an online event tomorrow to present a genuine fighting program for educators, parents, students, and the entire working class. Register today and invite your friends and coworkers that agree with the need for an independent struggle to halt the reopening of schools. Join the committee’s Facebook group, and sign up today for the WSWs Educators Newsletter to follow developments.



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