

Teachers across the US join call-in meeting hosted by Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee

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26 August 2020

More than 150 teachers, school employees and other workers from around the United States and internationally participated in a call-in meeting Saturday, August 22, sponsored by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee was formed earlier this month to organize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools.

Educators from Florida, Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, New York, California, Michigan, Texas, Hawaii and other states participated, along with Australia, Brazil and the United Kingdom.

The meeting began with several reports detailing the present situation facing educators, debunking the anti-scientific lies used to justify the unsafe opening of schools and calling on educators, parents and students to set up rank-and-file committees in their own districts and states. A video of the complete reports can be seen [here](#).

Evan Blake, a former teacher in Oakland, California and a Socialist Equality Party member, said the opening of schools had already led to nearly 3,000 reported infections in Florida, Georgia and other states, along with an increasing effort by states and districts to deliberately conceal information about new outbreaks.

While the Trump administration had designated educators as “critical infrastructure workers” to prepare the use of state force against resistant teachers, Democrats in New York, California and other states, along with the teacher unions, were mouthing empty phrases about safely opening schools. The aim of this bipartisan policy, Blake said, was to get children out of their homes so their parents could be sent back to work to produce profits for the corporations, which are needed to finance the mountain of debt created by the Wall Street bailout.

Citing the hundreds of protests, sickouts and other forms of resistance by educators across the country, Blake said, “A week ago, we announced the formation of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to break the isolation imposed on educators and unite across district and state lines. We are fighting to link up with autoworkers, Amazon and logistics workers, nurses and the entire working class to prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the opening of schools, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.”

Benjamin Mateus, a physician who has written extensively on the medical science of the pandemic for the *World Socialist Web Site*, refuted the lies that children returning to school would not get seriously ill or spread the virus.

He presented a series of slides on the spike in infections and hospitalizations among children, evidence that they are a vector for community spread, and recent studies about the aerosolization of the virus, which makes poorly ventilated schools particularly deadly.

With testing in the US declining and roughly tenfold lower than what is needed, Mateus said, “it is utterly negligent” to open the schools. Citing the demands of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, Mateus

said, “The schools must remain closed until the threat to health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees.”

Renae Cassimeda, a southern Californian teacher and member of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, explained that parents have been required to sign waivers releasing schools from liability in the event their child contracts the virus and dies. Educators have also been told to have their wills in order.

At the same time, she said, the American ruling class was exploiting the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic to “expand the looting of public education and accelerate privatization,” from the outsourcing of virtual learning to private contractors to the plans for school vouchers. “US public schools face a cumulative debt of more than \$300 billion in the coming year,” she noted, declaring that the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee would unite teachers to oppose austerity and demand that the resources used for the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street be redirected to guarantee state-of-the-art online learning and vastly improve public education.

Genevieve Leigh, the national secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), denounced the Democrats and Republicans for feigning concern over the academic and emotional well-being of children after “both corporate-controlled parties spent decades slashing funding, closing schools and gutting social services. Now these politicians and union bureaucrats have the audacity to use the students as pawns against the teachers, going so far as to say that teachers are harming the students by refusing to return to unsafe classrooms.”

“The SEP and IYSSE,” Leigh said, “firmly believe that every effort must be made to unite students and teachers. We urge students to take a stand on the side of health, science and progress.”

Peter, a teacher in Massachusetts, said 70 percent of school districts plan to open with the hybrid model “even though this actually expands the social circuit of children increasing the likelihood of community spread.”

Pointing to the treacherous role of the unions, he said, the Massachusetts Teachers Association “have done little more than empty gestures, at best calling for a phased-in approach that required teachers to report to schools immediately” and “merely delays a fuller reopening by a number of weeks.” This time, he said, “will be used by administrators and politicians to stage enough hygiene theater that they think will placate public concerns.” But teachers “recognize the existential threat to their lives” and those who join this committee, he said, had to show educators how to organize independently of the unions and big business politicians.

Laura, a preschool teacher from Arizona, said, “I support 100 percent a nationwide strike because it is not safe.” Teachers in the suburban Phoenix JO Combs district had succeeded in closing down schools by

calling out sick, she said. “In my district, the kindergartners and first graders were brought back to school without masks” she continued. “They said they ordered face shields for teachers, but they have not come in yet. I’m over 60, and with asthma and diabetes I’m high risk. We have to take a stand now.”

A teacher in Jacksonville, Florida, said Duval County educators had been organizing on a Facebook group called “Duval for a Safe Return” since June, commenting, “Public schools are being held hostage with our funds being threatened if we don’t open face-to-face. Richard Corcoran, our secretary of education, has been lying to the media, claiming there would be social distancing and enough PPE. My biggest class has 60 students and my co-workers have ‘small classes’ of 40 students. The district purchased little cardboard dividers about a foot-and-a-half tall that they put on the students’ desks that you can’t see through, so the students have to raise their heads above them to see the board.

“People are terrified but have started to organize. DTU (Duval Teachers United) is our union here, but they have marched lockstep with the district officials.” At least 80 teachers, he reported, had carried out a sickout on the first day of school, August 20, while hundreds had resigned over the summer as the reopening got closer. “Even the administrators feel trapped and they support the protests,” he added.

Another Jacksonville teacher said, “Our positivity rate magically went down from 11 percent to 4 percent this afternoon, so somebody is tweaking the numbers. I started hearing a month ago about office staff getting the virus, but it isn’t being reported. I can’t see how they can willfully do this,” she said, adding that she would join together with other teachers in the district to fight.

Alan, a history teacher from a rural Oklahoma district said, “Our state is open and there are only a handful of students wearing masks. The OEA (Oklahoma Education Association) did nothing during the strike in 2018. The power, the big money, the oil runs the state. We are a top state when it comes to poverty, it’s still like *The Grapes of Wrath*. There is a fighting spirit here, you guys saw that in the 2018 strike.

“In our school, the administration is going about it like nothing has changed. We’ve been given two rolls of paper towels and a bottle of sanitizer, which is alcohol and water called ‘Okie-Safe,’ which somebody got a contract for. The supplies we’ve been given for this worldwide pandemic that is threatening billions of people are the same as I got before the pandemic.

“We’re told not to talk about this in class. Don’t draw historic parallels to this moment. Just go ahead and teach the state-mandated curriculum. People in this state inherently know it is wrong and want to know what to do. What we need here is a lot of support and ideas on how to organize.”

An educator in New York City said, “A lot of the previous speakers are coming out of more politically conservative states. I’m from a city with a supposedly progressive mayor, Bill de Blasio. In areas where Democrats are in power, we’re finding that they are no less subservient to the capitalist class.”

The largest school district in the country, he said, was offering parents an online or a blended model, although district officials had made it very difficult for parents to navigate the platform to make this choice. In addition, he noted that there were only five cleaners to do “deep cleaning” in his school, which is very large, and the janitorial fund had been cut by 20 percent. “When a cleaner called out sick under normal conditions,” he said, another cleaner would get overtime to fill in. However, “with the budget cuts there is no more overtime money.”

“The DOE (Department of Education) knows there is substantial opposition and they are engaging in censorship to ensure that the truth does not come out. They have created a scenario where parents are being forced to send their kids to school with a whole bunch of disinformation.” This is why the safety committee, he said, had to spread the truth and organize opposition.

A Detroit paraeducator said even if teachers won online learning for a few weeks, support staff, like janitors and paraprofessionals, would still be forced to go into the unsafe buildings with the students. “Our lives are not the subject of a cruel experiment or a joke. The administration is playing with our lives and livelihoods as ancillary staff and seeing how far they can push this thing so the ruling elite can go back to business as usual. The rank-and-file committee is necessary to save lives and we must unite broader sections of the working class to halt the opening of schools.”

Mark, an autoworker who leads the Ford Dearborn Rank-and-File Safety Committee explained that the auto industry had only been shut down in mid-March after workers conducted a series of wildcat strikes. The half-measures hailed by the corrupt United Auto Workers union to reopen the plants in May were now being tossed aside, he said, with management and the union telling workers to remain on the job even if they came in contact with an infected person. “We need to join together in different industries, states and countries because we are the only ones looking out for our best interests. Together we are the vast majority and can do this.”

The reopening of schools is an international policy. Sue Phillips, a teacher in Melbourne, Australia and member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, brought greetings from the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which is leading the fight against unsafe school conditions and austerity. She said the CFPE insisted that the “health and safety of teachers and students could not be left in the hands of governments, employers or unions,” and would do everything to unite Australian and American educators in a common fight.

An educator in Brazil described the catastrophe in the country, which has the second highest death total in the world. “Eighty percent of people are against opening the schools, and in São Paulo teachers and staff are starting to discuss a strike in September. We have to unite every section of the working class to make this stop.”

Summing up the work that had to be done in coming days, Nancy Hanover, the editor of the *WSWS Educators Newsletter*, said, “A stand taken by teachers in Florida, Arizona and Massachusetts will galvanize workers both across the US and the world, just as educators did in 2018. Make the decision to join this committee. Organize discussions with teachers at your school and reach out to build up these committees.”

*The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges all those who agree with this fight to **contact us today**, join our **Facebook group** and make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting Saturday, August 29. **Register today** and share the event widely with your coworkers!*



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