

“We refuse to lay down our lives for profit or participate in a poorly designed, underfunded, deadly experiment”

Florida educators launch rank-and-file committee to oppose unsafe school openings

Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
27 August 2020

The following is a statement from the Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was just established to oppose unsafe conditions in schools that have already been opened in Jacksonville. The county has recorded more than 25,700 cases of COVID-19. According to local polls taken in early August, approximately 80 percent of parents in the district are opposed to in-person learning.

We are forming the Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect the lives of our students, families, and the most vulnerable members of our community.

After months of applying pressure to the Duval County Public School Board, Superintendent Dr. Diana Greene, and the Duval Teachers United union, our gravest concerns have gone unheard. Schools are open, and the virus is spreading. Teachers, fearful for their jobs and their lives, are trapped in unsafe classrooms without testing, social distancing, proper ventilation, or sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE). The promises made by Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran and repeated by the Board and Dr. Greene have gone unfulfilled.

These schools are not safe. Science has not guided this reopening; greed has. We refuse to lay down our lives for profit or participate in a poorly designed, underfunded, deadly experiment.

Therefore, we issue these demands as the basis for a struggle for a safe return to school in Duval County:

- We call for the immediate closure of all public, private, and charter schools. Schools must remain closed until the rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts—not only the Florida Department of Health (FDOH)—can ensure the safety of children, teachers, and school employees.

- Every student and teacher must be provided with up-to-date computer technology and Internet access for virtual instruction immediately. This technology must include working webcams and microphones.

- School ventilation systems must be renovated or replaced to

comply with scientific recommendations for a safe environment.

- When schools reopen face-to-face, we demand mandatory rapid on-site testing once a week for all faculty, students, and staff. Registered nurses must be stationed at every school, authorized to oversee testing and robust contact tracing. Working alongside educators organized in the rank-and-file safety committee, they must ensure that safety protocols are fully enacted. Teachers have the collective right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.

- Full transparency. We demand daily reporting to the community on results and COVID-positive cases. No one can return to a school building without a negative test.

- No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home. Teachers will not lose their position at their school if they decide to remain virtual. Teachers shall be provided unlimited COVID-19 sick leave.

- For freedom of speech and the protection of whistleblowers to include teachers, students, and staff.

- For the unity and safety of educators, parents, students, and workers in our community.

- Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children.

- These measures to be paid for by a surcharge on Florida’s billionaires. As of 2019, Florida was home to 52 billionaires, and 33 of these were listed on the Forbes 400.

We call on all educators, parents, and students in Duval County

who agree with these demands to join our rank-and-file safety committee. We also appeal to the same layer of people in the rest of Florida, the United States, and the world to support our struggle and build their own safety committees to fight side-by-side with us for our joint interests.

There is a growing sentiment for a national strike to halt the homicidal reopening of schools across the United States. We in Duval County, Florida, support this movement and wish to lend our strength to those around the country looking for mass action of the working class because our lives are at stake. We call on all layers of workers—manufacturing, logistics, food processing, health care, public and private sector—in Duval County and nationally to support our struggle.

We urge you to join and build the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee Facebook group and register for our call-in meeting on Saturday, August 29.

A growing number of educators across the country are forming district-wide and state-wide safety committees and joining the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the national network set up to unify teachers, parents and students across the US, link up with other sections of workers, and prepare a nationwide general strike to halt the deadly reopening of schools.

There are many life-and-death issues behind the decision to form the Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Here are some of the key facts.

Educators, parents, and students have been staging protests against the school openings all across Florida for weeks, including here in Duval County, Pasco County, Hillsborough County (Tampa), and Escambia County (Pensacola). Ignoring mass opposition, districts have moved forward to reopen across the state, producing more than 600 confirmed COVID-19 infections among students and staff, the largest confirmed school total of any state.

Florida Education Commissioner Corcoran lies to the media, claiming that schools have adequate social distancing and PPE in place. Social distancing is not happening, kids are not wearing masks properly, and there is a massive cover-up in terms of the number of new cases within the schools, where rapid testing is not taking place. The real number of cases in Florida schools is undoubtedly far higher than what is being reported.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Educators in Florida have been told to use unpaid FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) days if they contract the virus. However, many who exhibit symptoms are afraid to use their extremely limited number of days until they are more severely ill. The result is that faculty, staff, and students are entering the schools even when they have symptoms. The only precaution being taken at the entryways are temperature tests, which are not adequate indicators of the presence of COVID-19.

Despite widespread anger, the Florida Education Association (FEA), the trade union that claims to represent the interests of teachers in the state, is opposed to a strike. Trade union

bureaucrats have told teachers that they must not upset the “powers that be” and jeopardize their ability to collect dues from our paychecks. The local Duval Teachers United, which is affiliated with the FEA, has marched in lockstep with district officials.

The FEA’s primary response to the reopening was the filing of a lawsuit against the State of Florida, leaving the fight in the hands of the court system. The resulting decision, now in legal limbo, at most leaves the question of reopening up to district administrators, which means that counties like Duval can continue to operate face-to-face classes without interruption or adequate safety measures.

The FEA calls this court decision a “win,” but for rank-and-file educators this was no victory. Instead of the union’s promised demands of zero out-of-pocket costs for COVID-19 treatment; rapid testing for students, faculty, and staff; inspection, cleaning, and increased filtering of air conditioning units; and mask requirements for faculty and students—only the masking requirement (which costs the district nothing) is in place.

Finally, Florida has seen possibly the most aggressive drive in the nation for virtual charter schools and privatization. There is no doubt that the state’s demand for a return to school aims to both force workers back onto the job and continue to bleed public schools of resources through declining enrollment. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, an outspoken Trump supporter and school privatizer, has been a leading advocate of reopening schools in the state and has long aligned himself with the government’s attempt to destroy public education.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to coordinate and facilitate the building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood, to organize the immense opposition to the murderous plan to reopen schools. All those who agree with this perspective should 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!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact