

New York City teachers union holds strike authorization vote amidst mass opposition to school reopening

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Under tremendous pressure from New York City educators—whose profound opposition to Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan to reopen city schools by September 10 threatens to break out into wildcat action—the executive board of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is expected to vote Monday to authorize a strike, which would be followed by a Tuesday vote by union delegates.

The move to hold a strike authorization vote is a cynical charade, following the same path of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The vote in Chicago was clearly orchestrated with city officials, in order to buy time for the resumption of in-person learning. In Detroit, despite 91 percent of educators voting in favor of a “safety strike,” the DFT reached a miserable sellout agreement with the district last week which entails resuming in-person learning. A similar stunt protest vote is now being prepared in the largest school district in the US, with over 1.1 million students and over 75,000 teachers.

De Blasio’s plan, under a so-called “hybrid” model, calls for each school to split students into two or three groups that would alternate between remote and in-person learning. He and the city’s Department of Education (DOE) claim that opening under half- or third-capacity would be sufficient to ensure students and educators’ safety from COVID-19, which has killed roughly 10 percent of the city’s nearly 240,000 infected since March.

It is obvious to city educators that reopening is a deadly proposition. Students, especially young children, would necessarily come into close contact with each other and their teachers while navigating

hallways and congregating around entrances, regardless of how many are attending at once.

Furthermore, despite Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza’s claim that antiquated air filtration systems would be updated in school buildings across the city, only moderate improvements were made this past summer in the small fraction of buildings constructed after the 1970s. The vast majority of school buildings in the city, as in many other areas across the US, are much older and lack central air filtration systems, leaving students and educators vulnerable to airborne spread.

A recent study from the University of Florida confirmed that an infective aerosolized form of COVID-19 particles can become airborne and travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the recommended six feet for social distancing. These aerosols can remain suspended in the air for hours in poorly ventilated spaces. The findings underscore that any classroom with children and teachers is inherently dangerous, particularly in schools that have poor ventilation.

To encourage parents to send their children to school rather than elect for remote learning, De Blasio has made a number of last-minute, impossible promises that have only added to the stress of educators and principals, creating scrambles to hire 400 nurses for every school building and to prepare outdoor classrooms that will become obsolete as soon as winter weather arrives.

On Wednesday, de Blasio announced that each class would require three educators—one in-person, one remote, and one “Virtual Content Specialist” to coordinate between them—a week after Carranza announced that proposed state budget cuts would force

the city to lay off 9,000 of its 75,000 teachers.

De Blasio's reckless and homicidal drive to reopen the schools is entirely in keeping with the demands of the Trump administration and the ruling class, which recognize school reopenings as key to forcing working parents back to work. "It's time to say, public servants rise to the occasion and answer the call," de Blasio said in a press conference on August 20. "Our transit workers did, our first responders did, our healthcare workers did, our grocery workers did."

One teacher on social media responded, "Do these Democratic politicians who claim that Trump is the enemy realize that they are aligned with him here?" Indeed, the Trump administration had just branded educators "critical infrastructure workers" two days prior. Another teacher replied, "They are aligned with him in way more than this."

Just as they recognize that de Blasio is fundamentally aligned with the Trump administration, New York City educators must also recognize that UFT is fundamentally aligned with de Blasio and the Democratic Party.

UFT president Michael Mulgrew, regarded as a close ally of de Blasio, privately advised him to shut down schools as early as March 7, but did not call out the UFT membership to shut down the schools and save lives. The blood of educators who have since died from COVID-19, including at least 75 school-based employees of the DOE, is on his hands.

A vote for strike authorization would not amount to the immediate calling of a strike. Mulgrew has suggested that the UFT will first sue the state to delay school reopening, sowing illusions in the courts even after a similar suit in Florida proved to be a stunt that did nothing to stop reopening.

Even if it were to call a strike, the aim of the UFT would be to block rank-and-file educators from taking independent initiative. It has framed the strike not as one to stop school reopening until COVID-19 is contained, but merely to delay reopening until schools meet limited safety standards which it has no intention of enforcing, as evidenced by its fraudulent "safety walk-throughs" of school buildings by union bureaucrats.

The union's demand that all students and educators be cleared by just one test for the virus within 10 days of reopening is entirely inadequate. Its safety standards

are fundamentally the same as those of de Blasio, in that they are not based on what is needed to actually combat the pandemic and save lives: a national program of social distancing, mass testing and contact tracing.

The role of the UFT is to isolate and stifle the immense opposition of educators, who seek to prevent the spread of the virus. This was the role all the teacher unions played in the 2018-19 wave of teachers strikes that began in West Virginia. Groups such as the "progressive" Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which advocates for reforming the UFT, are pointing educators down a blind alley of trying to pressure the union to move to the left. The situation is now a life-and-death struggle, and these bankrupt forces must be rejected entirely.

New York City educators must mobilize their collective strength by building independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood to organize a citywide strike to keep schools closed, in coordination with the national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Nothing short of the broadest possible national and international response to the pandemic will be sufficient. Educators must join with the working class as a whole in demanding that resources be allocated for effective mass testing and contact tracing needed to save lives. Those seeking to carry out this struggle should contact us today.



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