

With thousands of new cases in US, opposition mounts against unsafe school and college reopenings

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Opposition continues to mount to the unsafe resumption of in-person learning as outbreaks of COVID-19 cases hit schools and universities across the United States. The rush to reopen the schools by the Trump administration, as well as state and local governments controlled by both parties, takes place as infections in the United States surpassed 6.1 million on Sunday, with over 187,000 deaths.

The full scope of outbreaks on public school campuses is not known because state and school district officials have sought to conceal the number of cases and silence educators who have attempted to warn the public. According to tallies kept by educators based on news reports, however, well over 3,000 students and staff members have become infected at public schools that have opened over the last several weeks.

On Sunday night, CNN reported that more than 8,700 positive cases have been reported at colleges and universities in at least 36 states, including 1,200 students at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, more than 1,000 at Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan universities, and 264 at the University of Dayton in Ohio.

At Georgia College, with 500 cases and one of the highest COVID-19 rates in the country, students at the Milledgeville campus staged a die-in protest Friday to demand online classes, improved testing and rigorous contact tracing. On Sunday, Temple University in Philadelphia suspended in-person classes for two weeks after officials reported nearly 103 COVID-19 cases. Temple students and faculty members protested on the first day of classes, August 24, demanding a switch to online classes only.

The battle over the reopening of public schools for more than 50 million students has become the focal point of working class opposition to the homicidal back-to-work policy in the United States and around the world. As the Washington DC-based publication *The Hill* put it Sunday, “The debate over in-person K-12 instruction planning is inseparably tied to the issues of child care needs and parents’ ability to return to the workforce to help revive the

struggling economy.”

In the nation’s largest school district, New York City, there is increasing sentiment for a strike to block Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plans to reopen schools for 1.1 million students and 135,000 school employees on September 10. The city, which has already had nearly 230,000 coronavirus cases and nearly 24,000 deaths from COVID-19, will open under a “hybrid model,” with some students taking classes online from home every day and up to 700,000 learning remotely part of the week and going to school buildings for up to three days a week.

Facing the possibility of a revolt from rank-and-file teachers, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is holding a meeting of its 100-member executive board tonight, where it could approve a proposal for a “safety strike.” If it passes, a Tuesday meeting of the union’s delegate assembly, which includes a representative from each of the district’s 1,700 school buildings, could vote to authorize UFT President Michael Mulgrew to call a strike of the union’s 120,000 members “if he deems it necessary.”

The UFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), will not conduct any serious fight. Mulgrew and the UFT were instrumental in blocking teachers from shutting schools last March and worked hand-in-hand with de Blasio in downplaying the danger of the spread of the contagion on the very eve of its explosion in New York City. The delay in closing the schools cost the lives of at least 74 educators.

As in other locations where the unions have threatened strikes (Chicago, Detroit) or filed state lawsuits (Florida, Texas, Iowa), the UFT is seeking to dissipate anger and implement a more calibrated reopening of the schools overseen by labor-management bodies, which will supposedly ensure adherence to safety procedures and the provision of sufficient PPE and cleaning supplies.

But there is no such thing as a “safe reopening” of schools amid a raging pandemic. Because of their higher average age

and related health conditions, an estimated 1.5 million teachers—one in four—are considered high risk for serious illness if they contract the disease. Because of this, record numbers of veteran K-12 teachers are resigning and retiring, an outcome that is desirable for districts seeking to cut costs.

But hundreds of thousands of teachers, school employees, parents and students are seeking to fight regardless of what the unions are doing. Since the summer, over 100 Facebook groups opposing unsafe school openings have sprung up and organized protests in cities and towns, large and small. Last Wednesday, teachers and supporters in Summit, New Jersey, a city of 22,500, held a sit-in protest to demand online learning. Educators carried signs declaring, “I can teach from a distance, but not from a coffin,” “What will you say when your child’s friends and teachers die,” and “Viruses don’t discriminate. Kids are not immune. Schools aren’t safe.”

Last month, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed as a national network to unify the struggles of teachers, school employees, parents and students independently of the unions and to prepare for a national strike to halt the unsafe opening of schools. A local rank-and-file committee has been established in Duval County, Florida, and more are being set up in a growing number of states and districts across the country.

In a video, the Duval Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee outlined its demands, including transparency about infection outbreaks, protection from retaliation for educators who expose the truth, full resources for remote learning, the upgrading of all school ventilation systems, regular onsite testing, and no loss of income or positions for educators who stay virtual. The committee also rejects the efforts to economically blackmail parents into sending their children to school out of fear of losing their income or their jobs.

“We ask for income protection while they stay home while their children learn remotely. Who is going to pay for that? We call for a surcharge on the 52 billionaires in Florida, which pay no income tax. The most ultra-wealthy people have to pay their way too. Through this surcharge there will be plenty of money to pay for income protection for parents, adequate technology for students, renovation of these decrepit schools and their ventilation systems. The money is there! And we demand that it be spent in the right places.”

On Saturday, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held its second online call meeting, which was attended by teachers from New York, California, Michigan, Florida, Hawaii, Oklahoma and many other states. A report on the meeting will be published in the next few days.

Resistance to the opening of schools is growing throughout the world. In Germany on Sunday, the Socialist Equality

Party, together with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), organized an online rally titled, “Stop the school openings! Prepare for a general strike!” Hundreds of teachers, students and parents participated in the live-streamed event.

Afterwards, one commented: “Schools and kindergartens are currently a ‘breeding ground’ for this virus, therefore classroom teaching should be suspended during the corona pandemic or only in very small, manageable groups. Teachers should receive more money and also reasonable digital equipment, reasonable internet should be provided to everyone and parents/families should receive comprehensive financial support during this time.”

Last week, students in Dortmund, Germany founded a committee at their school to take joint action against the school opening push and fight for safe teaching conditions. Speaking to the WSWs, the founders of the action committee in Dortmund, Jan and Berdan, appealed to teachers, students and parents to take part in the fight against school reopenings and to build a network of committees.

“From a moral point of view, what is happening in schools at the moment is reprehensible,” Berdan said. “More schools and also companies and factories should form action committees to prevent worse things from happening.” Jan added, “Our committee is open to anyone who agrees that the reopening of schools, as it is happening now, must be stopped.”



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