

“One student or teacher funeral is too many”

Teacher protests spread as COVID-19 rips through schools and universities

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Protests and job actions by educators opposed to the unsafe opening of schools have spread across the country as the drive to reopen public schools and universities has sparked a massive resurgence of COVID-19.

The University of Georgia reported a staggering 821 new COVID-19 cases from August 24–30. Additionally, three K-12 schools in Manatee County School District in Florida reported positive cases this week, sending hundreds of students with possible exposure into quarantine.

These deadly conditions have provoked hundreds of protests by teachers, parents and students across the country. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, the scene of the mass protests against police killings and the murder of protesters by a right-wing vigilante, teachers continued to protest over the school district’s plans for in-person learning.

Last week, the Kenosha Unified School District (KUSD) changed its plans and announced there will be an in-person option incorporated into their reopening plans, which starts September 14. Teachers, parents and students protested at the district office Monday—the day before Trump’s provocative visit to the city—demanding that officials reverse their plans for in-person instruction. They held signs that read “One student or teacher funeral is too many” and “Don’t make me choose between students and my health.” Teachers and parents are expected to protest and voice opposition at the KUSD school board meeting tonight, shortly after Biden visits the city.

On Monday, educators in Andover, Massachusetts, a town of 33,000 people 25 miles north of Boston, refused to enter school buildings for professional development, citing concerns about poor ventilation and safety, and decided to work outside the schools instead. Andover Public Schools are set to begin the school year with a hybrid learning plan on September 16, with each student attending in-person two full-days per week. School district officials denounced the action as an “illegal strike” and threatened to take legal action against teachers, who were then ordered back to work

by the union.

Nearly 375 teachers in Elizabeth, New Jersey publicly announced that they would refuse to show up to teach if school districts reopened for in-person instruction in September. In spite of threats that they may face charges of illegally striking, they insist that their safety as well as the safety of their students and families outweigh the possible retribution.

On Monday, teachers also protested outside the Brighton Area Schools district office, northwest of Detroit, over safety concerns and looming budget cuts. A recent press release outlined major budget cuts to the district due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The press release stated that the state projects “an excess of \$5 million in cuts in Brighton Area Schools’ budget for the 2020–2021 school year.”

Speaking to local news media during the protest, Jennifer, a teacher in BAS, said, “Why am I being asked to take a 5.8 percent pay cut in the middle of a pandemic when our district is not in a deficit situation.” She also expressed concerns over building ventilation, social distancing and other safety issues during a pandemic.

On Wednesday, hundreds of students and faculty at the University of Iowa participated in a “sickout” to demonstrate against the university’s deadly policy of continuing in-person education. In response to a recent rise in cases, students and faculty throughout the university demanded all classes be moved online.

Last month, teachers from around the country established the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite educators, parents and student and prepare for a general strike to halt the reckless opening of schools. Safety committees, which are independent of the unions, are being set up in Michigan, Florida, Texas and other states.

On Monday, teachers and community members in Jacksonville, Florida, including members of the Duval County Rank-and-File Safety Committee, spoke at the local school board meeting. The district is currently open to in-

person instruction under a hybrid model—part in-school, part online—for its roughly 130,000 students and over 8,000 teachers.

The district has announced three inadequate measures it will take to stop the spread: cardboard desk shields with clear plastic film, face masks, and a long-lasting bioprotectant spray. Teachers are speaking out against these pseudo-scientific reopening plans that fly in the face of recent science that prove aerosolized COVID-19 particles can become airborne and travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the recommended six feet for social distancing, and remain suspended in the air for hours in poorly-ventilated spaces.

One teacher told local reporters, “These cardboard dividers make it so that students can’t even see through a couple of them, so students have to lift their heads over them so that they can see the instructor, see the board. It makes the classrooms kind of impossible.”

In comments to the school board, Bradley Fisher, a teacher and member of the Duval County Rank-and-File Safety Committee (DCRFSC), said, “It’s appropriate that the board meeting began with a discussion about how many students are enrolled and how that will affect money because clearly that is at the heart of the decision to reopen these schools so unsafely. Dollars and cents before the lives of our most vulnerable—our children.”

He called school officials’ claims of a so-called safe reopening “false,” and presented the 10 demands of the DCRFSC. Primary among their demands were the calls for the immediate closure of all schools until the safety committee, working with trusted health professionals, deem them safe to reopen, and universal testing for all students, educators and staff.

Fisher denounced efforts by school authorities to intimidate and silence those exposing these dangers. “I would like to denounce the investigation that is currently filed against me for professional misconduct and other teachers who have dared to tell the truth about what the Superintendent’s reopening really looks like on the ground [and] who have had the bravery to whistle blow.”

Three local doctors also spoke during the meeting, all emphasizing the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over and must be handled carefully. Doctor Nancy Staats, member of Doctors Fighting COVID, stated that COVID-19 is more contagious than any other virus besides measles. Staats also noted the implications of “in-between deaths.” She said, “Yes, you might survive, but you will have a long-term problem and children can have asymptomatic cases and have lung damage, we’ve seen this.”

Trump has repeatedly demanded that workplaces and schools reopen, asserting at the Republican National Convention that, schools and workplaces “have to be open,

they have to get back to work.” The Republicans are more open in their push towards the murderous reopening policies, but whatever their rhetorical and tactical differences both parties fundamentally agree.

In remarks Wednesday, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden made clear that if he were in the White House, he would declare a national emergency to open the schools, and keep them open. Biden said, “If President Trump and his administration had done their jobs early on with this crisis, American schools would be open and open safely.” The Democratic candidate said he would use federal disaster money to provide educators and administrators the protective equipment for a “safe reopening” of schools.

It is not possible, however, to reopen schools safely while the pandemic continues to spread across the country. To do so will only lead to a resurgence of the contagion and more death.

However, the Democrats, just like the Republicans, are determined to reopen the schools in order to get parents back to work producing corporate profits, no matter what the human cost. This includes the mayor of New York City, the largest school district in the nation, which will resume in-person schooling on September 21.

As vice president under Obama, Biden oversaw an assault on teachers and public education, which has left school districts terribly underfunded and understaffed more than a decade after the Wall Street bailout of 2008–09. Having handed Wall Street a far greater bailout this year, tripling government debt, Biden would oversee a ruthless program of austerity, cutting funds to schools and other vital services to pay the debt.



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