

The global campaign to reopen schools and the international strategy of the working class

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The drive to reopen schools has become the focal point of the class struggle in countries throughout the world. The attempts by the ruling elites to force teachers and students back into classrooms, in order to force parents back to work producing profits, has been met with growing resistance by educators, parents, students and the broader working class.

The reopening of schools is already having catastrophic consequences in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is raging out of control globally. Each day over the past two weeks, roughly 260,000 people have been infected and 5,500 people have died worldwide due to the criminally negligent policies pursued by governments. The worst-hit countries—including the US, Britain, Brazil and Sweden—are led by officials consciously seeking to develop “herd immunity” based on mass infections and deaths.

The United States, at the center of world capitalism, provides the sharpest expression of the international drive to reopen schools. Since early July, the Trump administration has issued near-daily proclamations insisting that all schools reopen—from declaring that “science should not stand in the way” of reopening schools, to branding educators “critical infrastructure workers,” to threatening to divert funding from public schools that do not reopen to private, parochial and charter schools that do.

Most recently, Trump has enlisted Professor Scott Atlas, a fellow of the right-wing Hoover Institution at Stanford University, to provide official sanction for the homicidal campaign. The model country that Atlas points to for the US to emulate is Sweden. Last month, it was revealed that Sweden’s chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, explicitly promoted keeping schools open in order to facilitate the development of “herd immunity.” As a result, the number of deaths from COVID-19 in Sweden is over nine times higher than its neighbor Finland. Adopting this policy in the US could kill millions.

On Monday, Atlas visited Tallahassee, Florida, where he urged Republican Governor Ron DeSantis to be even more aggressive in reopening the schools. Already, 1.1 million Florida students have resumed in-person learning,

undoubtedly contributing to the 9,200 new infections among children in the second half of August. There has been a 191 percent increase in the number of children infected since July 9, before schools reopened. At least 611 children have been hospitalized in the state, and eight have died.

Equally beholden to Wall Street, the Democratic Party and its backers in the teachers unions are in full agreement with the campaign to reopen schools. Their only difference is that instead of using blunt force, they advance the fraudulent claim that reopening schools can be done “safely,” with cosmetic safety measures.

On Monday, United Federation of Teachers (UFT) President Michael Mulgrew announced an agreement with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, to force hundreds of thousands of students back into classrooms in the largest school district in the US, based on wholly inadequate safety measures that will do nothing to prevent the spread of the virus across the city and region.

In a campaign speech Wednesday, Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden declared, “Getting our schools opened safely and effectively, this is a national emergency.” Biden offered only tactical criticisms of Trump for his “failure to make sure educators and administrators have the equipment, the resources and the training they need to open safely under the circumstances we find now.”

The *New York Times*, the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, published an opinion piece Wednesday by Nicholas Kristof in which he urged “that we do everything possible to allow children to safely resume in-person learning.” He added, “It’s absurd that we have allowed liquor stores, gyms, gun shops, restaurants and marijuana dispensaries to operate while keeping schools shut.”

The same ruling class policies are being pursued worldwide, with disastrous results for the working class.

In Brazil, the country with the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths after the US, the fascist president Jair Bolsonaro is relying on state and local politicians to reopen schools across the country, including his ostensible opponents in the Brazilian Social Democratic

Party (PSDB). Within the first week of classes resuming in Manaus, the capital of the state of Amazonas, outbreaks of COVID-19 erupted in 36 schools.

In Britain, the Boris Johnson government is not requiring teachers or students to wear face masks in classrooms. Similar to the Democrats in the US, the Labour Party under right-wing Blairite Sir Keir Starmer fully supports the campaign to reopen the schools, while offering toothless criticisms.

The German political establishment began reopening schools in early August as part of a broader reopening of the economy, which immediately caused outbreaks across the country. Plans are in place to reopen schools across Europe, including in Italy and Spain, the hardest-hit countries in the initial months of the pandemic. Schools reopened throughout France Tuesday, sending 12 million students back into classrooms, while the pandemic is once again spreading throughout the country.

In Russia, schools reopened nationwide on Tuesday, the same day the country surpassed one million COVID-19 cases. Officials are taking no precautions and are not even requiring teachers or students to wear face masks. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated Tuesday that there are no plans to transition to fully online learning in the event of outbreaks in schools.

In each country, these policies are provoking enormous opposition. Hundreds of protests have taken place worldwide to denounce the reopening of schools. Well over 100 Facebook groups have formed to oppose school reopenings, attracting hundreds of thousands of members worldwide. Educators, parents and students have begun to establish independent rank-and-file safety committees in the US, Germany, Britain and Australia, and there is growing sentiment for nationwide and even international strike action.

A survey of over 200 British educators and parents conducted by the *World Socialist Web Site* recently found that over half of respondents said they would participate in a general strike to halt the reopening of schools. This Saturday, the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) is hosting an online meeting to organize the widespread opposition to school reopenings, which has drawn wide interest.

In Germany, a public meeting held last weekend by the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (Socialist Equality Party) attracted hundreds of teachers, students and parents from across the country. Students in Dortmund, Germany recently founded a committee at their school to organize opposition to school reopenings and fight for safe teaching conditions.

The Datafolha research institute recently found that 80 percent of Brazilians oppose reopening schools, while 60 percent recognize that this policy will “severely aggravate

the pandemic.” There is huge support for nationwide strike action, which would dovetail with an ongoing postal workers’ strike, but the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE) and other unions are doing everything they can to prevent this from taking place.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the US, formed three weeks ago, has quickly become a pole of attraction for those opposed to school reopenings. Hundreds of educators, parents, students and other workers throughout the US and internationally have participated in two online meetings hosted by the committee. Last week, the Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Committee was formed to organize the immense opposition of educators in the Jacksonville, Florida region, while similar committees are being formed in New York City, Detroit, Texas, Hawaii and other cities and states across the country.

Faced with a global campaign by the ruling elites, who are intent on reopening schools and accelerating the spread of the pandemic, the working class must be guided by a global perspective. While the teachers unions in every country promote nationalism and subordinate the interests the working class to the needs of the profit system, the pandemic is an international crisis that can be addressed only through a globally coordinated struggle by the working class.

The central task facing educators, parents, students and the entire working class is to build networks of rank-and-file safety committees in every country, to mobilize the collective strength of the working class as an independent social force. The reckless reopening of schools must be halted, and the vast resources squandered on the bailout of the corporate and financial oligarchy must be redirected to provide state-of-the-art technology for remote learning, universal testing and the provision of income protection and high-quality health care to all those impacted by the deadly contagion.

The Socialist Equality Party in the US and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to fuse the growing movement of the working class with the political perspective and program of world socialism: that is, the rational and democratically planned reorganization of society to meet human needs, not private profit.



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