Opposition to school reopenings mounts across Florida as spread of COVID-19 deepens

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Opposition to the forced reopening of schools across Florida is building each day, as this policy has already produced over 1,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at dozens of schools. In just the first three days after reopening schools Monday, Hillsborough County School District, which encompasses Tampa, Florida, reported 28 cases involving 23 schools and the district office, bringing the total cases in Hillsborough to 37,821.

More broadly, the spread of COVID-19 continues to deepen throughout the state, with 637,013 confirmed cases and over 11,800 deaths as of September 4. Both figures likely represent only a fraction of the total as a lack of testing and an official misinformation campaign on the part of the right-wing Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and the Trump administration have deliberately concealed the true spread of the disease.

On Friday, students in Leon County, home to the state capitol Tallahassee, protested the deadly conditions under which they are being forced to learn.

Announcing their walkout on Facebook, the group of students stated: “During the summer Florida Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis released a statewide executive mandate overriding local rule and forcing Florida school boards to open brick and mortar schools in August despite local COVID testing positivity rates and despite Florida remaining one of the top three states for community spread of the coronavirus in the nation.”

The statement added, “Students, teachers, and parents across the state spoke out all summer. Florida Education Association filed a lawsuit that has constantly been tripped up by judges that are playing politics with people's lives.”

The demonstration took place shortly after the Leon County School district confirmed that seven cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed within the first week of reopening schools.

Maddelina Kaji, a senior at Leon High School digitally, told local news station WCTV: “This means so much to me because my grandfather died in April because of coronavirus. So, since then, trying to prevent the spread has been my number one priority and really how I’ve been dealing with that trauma. So that’s why I’m here today. I don’t want anyone else to ever experience what I experienced.”

Florida educators have continued to organize opposition to reopening. In Jacksonville on Tuesday, the Duval County school board was addressed by multiple teachers throughout the district including Bradley Fisher, a member of the newly formed Duval County Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Fisher told the assembled board members, “I think it’s appropriate tonight that the board meeting started with a discussion of 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 children.”

Fisher was referring to a figure presented in Duval County Superintendent Dr. Dianne Green’s opening report. She stated that student enrollment in the county, currently at 108,041, was off by 3,416 students. If those students are not enrolled in classes by mid-October, the district stands to lose $23,376,464 in state funding.

Fisher went on to state the demands issued by the safety committee. He was followed by more local educators who criticized the safety measures in place as grossly inadequate to prevent the spread of the virus, including a science teacher who described the ineffectiveness of desk shields and other token items to contain the aerosolized virus.

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The teachers were followed by three local doctors who strongly criticized the reopening of schools and called for any further decisions on reopening schools to be guided by genuinely scientific data.

The DeSantis administration has remained intransigent in fighting efforts by educators and students to reverse the reopening of schools. It was reported this week that the governor's office will spend at least half a million dollars to pay private attorneys to represent the state in its court battle against the Florida Education Association (FEA) and the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association, who filed a lawsuit last month challenging Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran's July 6 order requiring all schools to be open five days a week for in-person classes at the beginning of the school year. If districts do not comply with the Commissioner's order, they face the elimination of state funding.

In hearings last week, a Leon County judged sided with the unions and issued a preliminary injunction against the commissioner's order. However, that order was later blocked by the state court of appeals, which placed a stay on the injunction. In rejecting the plaintiffs' claim that Corcoran's order violated the Florida state constitution's guarantee of safe and secure public schools, the appellate court made the outlandish claim that "Nothing in the emergency order requires any teacher or student to return for in-person instruction at a brick and mortar school."

DeSantis has also moved to reduce testing in Florida. Earlier this week, DeSantis eliminated the state's contract with Quest Diagnostics to conduct COVID-19 testing after the company had delayed reporting the results of 75,000 tests to the Florida Department of Health due to a technical error.

Though the individuals who had taken the tests were informed of their results in a timely manner, DeSantis cited the negative impact the newly released figures would have on the state's COVID-19 Dashboard, which had initially reported 3,773 new cases last Monday, with a 5.9 percent test positivity rate. When the new data is included, the number of new cases more than doubled to 7,643, with a 6.8 percent positivity rate.

Before the contract with Quest was eliminated, the company had conducted approximately 1.4 million tests since the start of the pandemic, roughly 30 percent of the total in Florida. DeSantis is evidently seeking to exploit the company's recent failure to promptly report test results in order to dramatically reduce overall testing in Florida and facilitate the further reopening of the economy.

The governor's contempt for the lives of those he represents was displayed earlier this week, when he met with representatives of bars and nightclubs and pledged to lift the ban on their operations soon. DeSantis also lifted the state's ban on personal visits to nursing homes, a move that will further imperil the state's most vulnerable population. Approximately 80 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Florida have occurred among residents 65 or older.

In order to fight back against the thoroughly reactionary DeSantis administration, which is dutifully implementing the policies demanded by Trump and the entire ruling class, the working class must assert its own independent interests by organizing the vast opposition that exists throughout the state and country. The urgent task is to unite across district and state lines through the formation of a network of independent, rank-and-file safety committees.

No confidence can be placed in the FEA and its parent organizations, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which are intimately tied to the Democratic Party and fully support the capitalist system that is responsible for mass deaths and suffering from the pandemic. The legal maneuvers of the FEA—which even if successful would still allow districts to reopen at their discretion—are meant to cover up the fact that they refuse to mobilize their 137,000 members to halt the homicidal drive to reopen schools across Florida.

There is growing sentiment for a broad-based struggle to halt the opening of schools, stop the spread of the pandemic, and save lives. What is required is the building of a conscious leadership to orient educators, parents and students to the broader working class, and to coordinate this struggle on a national and global scale.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding weekly online call-in meetings to bring together educators from across the US and internationally, to discuss this perspective and the way forward. We urge you to attend today's call-in meeting, invite your coworkers, engage in our Facebook group, and join the committee today.

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