“Workers must refuse to be sacrificed in the name of profits at the hands of the ruling class”

Florida parent denounces Osceola County public school system’s unsafe reopening

The World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter
5 September 2020

The following is a statement sent to the World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter *by Christina Stewart, a parent in Osceola County who wished to speak about the unsafe reopening of schools in the area. Osceola has recorded more than 11,300 cases of COVID-19, and a public school janitor died due to complications with the virus earlier this week.*

This past Tuesday, Juan Sosa, a janitor at the Celebration School K-8 located in our county, tragically died due to complications related to COVID-19. Mr. Sosa was a 12-month staffer who contracted the virus over the summer along with four other 12-month staffers. He had been in a coma since June 20—a coma that the School District of Osceola County, Florida tried to keep hidden for weeks. I feel very hurt for his family, including his niece who made a heart-wrenching public statement while her small child circled her legs.

The lack of transparency is infuriating, depressing, and deadly. Our schools did not begin notifying us of exposed, diagnosed, and quarantined workers and students until this past Wednesday. Even this data, however, does not tell us enough. It is in reality a miserable attempt by the school board to appear transparent.

Our district has not had a consistent plan to contain COVID-19 or protect any of its students, faculty, or staff from becoming infected. They have changed their “plan” several times and, even then, these plans have not been enforced. We have gone from having no masks required, to having masks required, to a policy where just face shields are fine, to having no face shields allowed—all within the course of a single month. Administrators have promised hand sanitizer and cleaning products that have never fully materialized.

The few teachers who have received these supplies quickly had them taken away when they complained that their contract does not include cleaning. They were then told that their rooms would not be cleaned between classes. Many school bathrooms are not stocked with soap and paper towels, and the air conditioning in many schools constantly goes in and out.

Classrooms that do have functioning air conditioners have these turned off at night, leaving their rooms sweltering for the next day with little ventilation. Newly constructed schools have narrow stairwells with no air conditioning vents and no windows to open. The district promised that older classrooms would be deep-cleaned, but these are still riddled with mold, dead bugs, and sometimes construction debris from summer maintenance projects.

Teachers are required to turn in seating charts, and schools are using these charts to secretly notify the families of students who have been exposed to the virus without notifying the actual teachers who share the same classrooms. Teachers who do find out that they were exposed to COVID-19 in the classroom are being pressured to return to work before receiving their test results or are being told that getting tested is “optional.”

Teachers with medically-documented ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requests are being denied leave. One Osceola teacher who testified in the

© World Socialist Web Site

recent FEA lawsuit is a paraplegic whose doctor warned that he would die if he contracted the virus since he is not able to cough and expel build up properly, essentially leaving him to drown. He was told to return to work in a hot portable classroom with no sink or bathroom to wash his hands.

Kids are being told to socially distance at bus stops but are packed into buses with two occupants per seat. Virtual-learning teachers are being forced to come into public buildings to work and are not allowed to work safely from home. We can go on for many more paragraphs and still find ourselves unable to fully explain all of the rotten conditions that our children, faculty, and staff are forced to endure.

Despite all of these unacceptable conditions, the Osceola County School Board and Superintendent Debra Pace produce what can only be called propaganda for their social media sites. In one recent video, for example, Pace surprises her administrators with "Administrator of the Year" awards, but the video pans to the unsuspecting administrators who are unmasked and not practicing social distancing. They then comically fumble to mask themselves for the camera.

When teachers try to challenge these administrators for not adhering to CDC recommendations, they are told, "It's okay, we've been working together all summer." When whistleblowers take pictures of these gross offenses and submit them to the press, they are bullied and retaliated against at work. One parent has received legal threats for posting a picture on Facebook of a vice principal who was refusing to wear a mask.

These deplorable conditions are merely an extension of what residents of Osceola County have to face on an everyday basis. Our county is located just south of Orlando, where Disney reigns supreme. Osceola is sprinkled with Super Walmarts; a plethora of resorts, hotels, and tourist attractions; and an Amazon warehouse.

The average income in Osceola County with a bachelor's degree is just $37,000 per year, and our unemployment is the highest in the state at 31.1 percent. All of our schools are Title 1 schools, and we rank 67 out of 67 among counties when it comes to the average amount of money spent on education. Despite the presence of so many large corporations, the School District of Osceola County is still the largest employer, with roughly double the number of employees as the next employer on the list. Disney has spent millions of dollars funding politicians who ensure that wages and worker protections are some of the worst in the nation.

Disney and the other greedy corporations have decided that despite Florida being the epicenter of a global pandemic, it is time to reopen, and they want their workers back. This means that our school district is requiring roughly 8,000 teachers to return to school so that the impoverished people in our community can return to work. This has only been our second week back, and the situation is already a disaster.

Those of us who oppose the unsafe reopening have tried protesting and speaking at board meetings, but the school board collectively rolled its eyes before voting 5–0 against us. We are told to be grateful for crumbs and not expect anything more.

It is dire that out of the tragedy that has unfolded so far that we see the largest national workers solidarity movement to withhold labor. Workers must refuse to be sacrificed in the name of profits at the hands of the ruling class. If this does not happen, we are all doomed.

Signed,
Christina Stewart
Pissed-off Parent

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to coordinate and facilitate the building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood, to organize the immense opposition to the murderous plan to reopen schools. All those who agree with this perspective should contact us today, join our Facebook group and make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting Saturday, September 5. Register today and share the event widely with your coworkers and friends!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site