Health disaster and class conflict on horizon as millions of students return to US schools

Evan Blake
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Following the Labor Day holiday, the vast majority of K-12 public schools have now begun their fall semester across the United States. Millions of students and educators have been forced back into overcrowded and dilapidated schools, which will induce a massive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yesterday, the US surpassed 6.5 million COVID-19 cases and is on track to soon reach the gruesome death toll of 200,000.

The nation's roughly 13,600 school districts have been left to their own devices, reopening either fully in-person, or fully remote instruction, or under the "hybrid" model combining the two. Given the rapid level of community transmission of COVID-19 and the porousness of district and state boundaries, the latest science makes clear that the only safe method of instruction at present is full remote learning.

A study released in July found that the transition to remote learning in the spring prevented 1.37 million infections over a 26-day period and saved roughly 40,600 lives in the US over a 16-day period. Another study last month found that aerosolized particles containing COVID-19 can travel up to 16 feet through indoor settings, exposing the utter fraud that a "hybrid" model with minimal social distancing can be done safely.

Democratic and Republican politicians nationally are consciously implementing a policy of "herd immunity" that they know will lead to a catastrophic loss of life for the most vulnerable sections of the population. They do so in order to reduce pension and health care obligations, and to force parents back into factories and other workplaces where they face ramped-up exploitation in order to service the unprecedented levels of debt produced by the CARES Act bailout of Wall Street and major corporations.

There are no national or state bodies aggregating reopening plans for all school districts in the country, a damning testament to the contempt of the ruling class for educators and the entire working class.

The most comprehensive list of reopening plans has been compiled by *Education Week*, which reports plans for 888 districts across the country, including the 100 largest districts. Of these districts, 219 are providing fully in-person instruction involving 2.54 million students; 246 are reopening under the "hybrid" model involving 3.84 million students; and 423 are reopening fully online involving 13.2 million students.

Based on this list, roughly a third of all public school students have returned to classrooms at least part-time. If these figures are extrapolated for all 50.8 million students in the US, then roughly 6.6 million have now resumed fully in-person learning and another 10 million have resumed partial in-person learning under the hybrid model.

The results of these policies have already been catastrophic, with thousands of COVID-19 infections tied to K-12 school reopenings and tens of thousands on college campuses. Following reports of major outbreaks at schools that first reopened in late July, a regime of censorship has been erected across the country, with districts and states falsely claiming that HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) laws prevent them from sharing information on outbreaks in schools.

In the coming weeks there will be a flood of news reports that teachers, education workers, students and parents have died as a result of school reopenings, which will provoke a groundswell of opposition. There will be revolts by educators, attempted retaliation by administrators and the state apparatus, and the eruption of broader struggles by the working class against the homicidal back-to-school and back-to-work policies.

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Teachers and school workers have no choice but to take matters into their own hands, form their own organizations which they control, and fight for their collective self-defense. The critical task at present is to rapidly build an interconnected network of independent, rank-and-file safety committees to prepare for the immense struggles that lie ahead. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which formed four weeks ago to facilitate the growth of this network of rank-and-file safety committees, made the following statement condemning the mass reopening of schools:

> These policies will lead to untold suffering and death, all of which is entirely unnecessary. We call for the immediate closure of all schools that have reopened, in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. To achieve this, educators, parents and students must take matters into their own hands and organize independently of the unions and both big business parties, which are doing everything to facilitate the reopening of schools.
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> In schools that have reopened, rank-and-file safety committees must demand and enforce the provision of the highest-grade PPE, daily and rapid testing for all students and staff, the reduction of class sizes to no more than 10 students, the retrofitting of schools to have the most advanced ventilation systems, and other measures to ensure the greatest degree of safety. In opposition to the conspiracy to withhold vital public information, these committees will expose the truth, defend whistleblowers against retaliation and uphold the right of educators to collectively refuse to work when outbreaks occur.
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> In fighting for these demands, the committees will win wide support among educators and prepare the grounds for a broad struggle to completely close schools and transition to high quality remote learning, with online working conditions also to be controlled by these committees.

The formation of rank-and-file safety committees must be wholly independent of both the Democrats and Republicans, as well as the teachers unions and their apologists in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudoleft organizations, all of whom support the reopening of schools with only minor tactical differences.

Throughout the summer and over the past six weeks that schools have reopened en masse, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates, have directly facilitated the homicidal reopening of schools.

The unions have promoted illusions in impotent lawsuits, opposed the mobilization of millions of educators in joint strike action, and reached miserable sellout deals with Democratic politicians to reopen schools with in-person instruction in New York City, Detroit and other cities. In districts such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego, the unions struck deals to start the semester online, simply forestalling the resumption of in-person learning by a few weeks.

There has been an outpouring of opposition since early July, when the Trump administration began escalating the drive to reopen schools. There have been hundreds of protests, which are continuing, votes for strike action and widespread discussion on social media. The most conscious expression of this opposition has been the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in Detroit, Florida, Texas and other locations.

The orientation of these committees is to the broader working class in the US and internationally, fighting for the unification of educators with workers in the auto industry, health care, logistics, meatpacking, and all those who face the same deadly conditions worldwide.

Only through such unity will it be possible to mount a powerful struggle to shut the unsafe schools, provide high quality online learning, and take the measures needed to contain the pandemic and save workers' lives. All those who agree with this perspective should fight to build such committees today.

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