

Texas educators launch safety committee to save lives

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
8 September 2020

The following is a statement from the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has been established to mobilize opposition to the increasingly unsafe conditions in Texas schools and the draconian demands placed on educators and other school workers. For more information and to join the committee, contact us today.

Texas has had over 650,000 cases of COVID-19. More than 80 percent of hospital beds are in use in the state's five largest cities, and flu season is right around the corner. Additionally, COVID-19 has recently been shown to transmit primarily through aerosols, which can collect and circulate in small indoor spaces without advanced ventilation systems—the precise situation in most Texas classrooms. The safety measures deployed so far (masks, social distancing, temperature checks/surface cleaning) do not address these new facts about the nature of the disease.

We are creating and mobilizing the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to defend the life of every student, teacher, and family member in this state. Repeated entreaties to local governments have failed. Union-backed lawsuits against unnecessary district reopenings that endanger the most vulnerable have been defeated and subsequently dropped.

Governor Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton have comprehensively reneged on the most elementary provisions of security and safety for educators, and these failures fall disproportionately onto the backs of students and teachers in already underfunded districts. Neither the Abbott administration nor the Texas AFT (American Federation of Teachers) are invested in any serious defense of the interests of teachers and paraprofessionals, preferring instead to lend their voices to the back-to-work profit drive on behalf of Wall Street at the expense of the working class.

Educators in Texas are being emotionally and legislatively blackmailed into compliance with unsafe work conditions. The attorney general has shown his willingness to overrule the recommendations of local medical authorities advising school closures, as evidenced by his July 28 memorandum forbidding the preemptive closure of schools based on mandates from supervising health authorities.

Texas universities, pursuing a reckless, unplanned, and murderous reopening that started in mid-August, have seen

massive case increases. Teacher Assistants have been forced to choose between teaching in-person or losing their jobs, while university resident halls have turned into quarantine centers.

The assertion that a “safe reopening” of K-12 schools and universities is possible has already been proven false in practice. Hundreds of infections have taken place in K-12 schools across the state. Baylor University has 824 cases after resuming majority in-person classes on August 24; Texas A&M has 878 cases since August 22; Texas Tech has 717 cases; and the University of Texas Austin has 601 cases.

Texas educators must act in affirmative self-defense and stand their ground on the absolute principle of lives over profit.

Therefore, we issue the following demands and commit ourselves to fighting for them:

1. We unequivocally demand the cessation of in-person instruction for all public schools, private schools, and charter schools in the State of Texas. Any and all decisions on the viability of in-person instruction should be determined democratically by workers, based on the scientifically grounded guidance of trusted health authorities, as determined by rank-and-file educators.

2. The culture of fear and intimidation that has been cultivated by politicians and the media to intimidate teachers into endangering themselves and their loved ones must come to an immediate halt. We demand an end to the coercion and economic blackmail that have been weaponized against educators in Texas.

3. The attacks on evidence-based policy leveled by partisan state lawmakers and the Executive Branch serve only to eradicate public trust in scientific mandates, which endanger each and every Texas resident. We call for an end to the assault on science and scientifically guided public policy, which have been attacked for specific partisan and financial goals.

4. The threat posed to older and/or immunocompromised educators has forced many into a reluctant retirement or resignation. To that end, we demand that every educator facing such a predicament be guaranteed full income and be allowed to return to his or her job once safe conditions are reestablished.

5. Teachers working from home under the current conditions must be compensated at their full salaries. Additionally, teachers must be provided unlimited sick leave to avoid the

macabre outcome of rationing sick days based on severity of symptoms. No teacher should lose a cent in compensation due to pandemic accommodations. All K-12 educators, college professors, and Teacher Assistants working from home under the current conditions must be compensated at their full salaries.

6. The life of each and every student is invaluable and non-negotiable. We demand an end to the homicidal “herd immunity” approach that endangers the most vulnerable children in the most underserved and put-upon communities. To write off the death of even one student as an “acceptable casualty” or “inevitable loss” is barbarism of the highest order.

7. The safety of children is not limited to their physical well-being. Parents must be liberated to focus on the issues and concerns that arise with their children without the threat of economic ruination when they prioritize the needs of their children over those of their jobs. To this effect, we demand full income protection for parents who elect to stay home to facilitate their children’s education.

8. The bipartisan expiration of the \$600-a-week federal unemployment benefits reveals the bloody intent of both political parties to prosecute a campaign of downward wage pressure upon the workers and their families. We demand a provision of generous economic and educational resources for both short- and long-term unemployed parents to be financed by taxes on oil production and large estates. In addition, all college tuition payments must be frozen, and student loan debt abolished to provide free higher education to all.

9. We demand the provision of rapid-response on-site testing for all faculty, students, and paraprofessional staff. Registered nurses must work alongside administrators to ensure safety protocols are both followed and enforced. Contact tracers must be stationed at every school in every district to provide the public with up-to-date information about the locality and severity of the virus.

10. The events that take place within school are in the public domain, and any efforts by administrators or government officials to conceal the details about the spread of the infection must be opposed and the truth revealed to the public. We demand the protection and support of whistleblowers who draw attention to the problems at hand for students and teachers alike. We refuse to abide the current regime of fear and censorship that has characterized the response to the pandemic at the highest levels of administrative and executive government.

Teachers must not be made to march to their graves!

We, Texas teachers, are calling on our colleagues, caregivers, students, administrators, college admissions officers, custodial and nutritional staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, workers in other industries, and anyone else concerned about this threat to join us in protecting ourselves and each other from a reckless and cynical physical return.

Texas is the second most populous state in the United States,

with 29 million residents. It is home to a large and powerful working class drawn from all around the world, speaking numerous different languages, and connected to the international process of production by countless channels.

Sitting over this powerful working class is one of the most reactionary state governments anywhere. The law in Texas is that strikes of public employees are illegal, and any attempt to organize work stoppages among public employees will be met with the full repressive force of the state apparatus.

The powers-that-be in the state government are frightened by the immense power that teachers and educators hold, hence their relentless assault on each and every attempt by workers to assert their democratic rights.

Meanwhile, the same unions that collect our monthly dues march us into danger! We are expected to expend untold efforts to provide quality education. In return, we receive no support from the state government, district-by-district financial blackmail from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and a series of insufficient ad hoc solutions to problems that grow worse by the day and more numerous by the hour.

It is high time teachers recognize their essential status! If teachers do not teach, then parents cannot work. If parents cannot work, then business cannot profit. And if businesses cannot profit, then their dividends will cease while the stock market simultaneously craters. There is already a shortage of educators in the state, and we have been put upon for too long.

Already, rank-and-file safety committees are being formed in cities, counties and states across the country. We stand in absolute solidarity with those efforts, and we lend our full structural and material support to those educators and the members of the communities they represent. We encourage educators reading this to get involved in the effort to join a rank-and-file safety committee or to lead the campaign to create one in your area.

We are exercising our First Amendment rights to free speech and freedom of association. We commit ourselves to studying and bringing forward the history of the struggles of the working class in Texas, in America and internationally and reviving the traditions of real workers struggles.

There is no official political organization, union, or body that is working seriously to defend educators and workers from the murderous back-to-school drive and advance their interests. Therefore, we are taking matters into our own hands through democratic self-organization, independent of the unions and the Democratic and Republican parties. We urge all those in agreement to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact