

New York City educators launch safety committee to halt the reopening of schools

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
10 September 2020

We announce today the formation of the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the school reopenings enacted by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio with the full support of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The opening of schools for more than one million students directly places the lives of educators, school workers, students and the broader community at grave risk for the sake of corporate profit.

This criminal decision promises to re-infect the population of the largest metropolitan region in the US, with a population of 20 million people. The horrific scenes from March, April and May, when mass graves were dug on Hart Island, when hospitals were overwhelmed and the health care infrastructure was brought to the verge of collapse, will soon be repeated unless we mobilize the working class to put an end to these homicidal policies. The city alone has lost nearly 24,000 people to the virus, the majority of whom were working class residents.

In launching this committee, we stand wholly independent of both the Democrats and Republicans, as well as the UFT and its backers, all of whom have conspired to enforce the reopening of schools. The UFT has played a treacherous role in covering up for the lies of de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, while attempting to suffocate the rising tide of militancy among educators by issuing hollow threats to strike while engaging in backroom deals with the de Blasio administration to force educators back into unsafe schools.

In a span of less than 48 hours last week, UFT President Michael Mulgrew, who preempted a scheduled delegate assembly vote for strike authorization with the announcement of the deal he struck with de Blasio, went from denouncing unsafe conditions in schools to proclaiming that the DOE was carrying out “the most aggressive policies and greatest safeguards of any school system in the United States of America.”

In fighting to oppose the reckless reopening of schools, we base ourselves on the following non-negotiable, scientifically-grounded demands:

- We demand the immediate suspension of all plans to initiate in-person learning across all K-12 schools and colleges in New York City. All teachers and students must be provided with the technology necessary to carry out fully remote instruction, including the provision of high-quality computer hardware and software and all other accessories. High-speed internet access must be provided to all families free of charge, by converting the telecommunications corporations into public utilities.

- We demand full employment security and wages for all workers in New York City. The threat of layoffs, reduced hours and pay, and forced retirement issued by the mayor and cynically repeated by the UFT underscores the reactionary character of the Democratic Party and its backers in the trade unions. We reject any form of austerity in the home of Wall Street and the center of world capitalism. The vast wealth of the financial oligarchy must be heavily taxed to pay for the health and safety of all workers and the education of the younger generation!

- We demand full income protection for all parents who need to remain home to facilitate their children’s education for the duration of the pandemic, as well as a relief package to immediately provide generous economic resources for all those that have been cast into the ranks of the unemployed.

- We demand the immediate freezing of college tuition and abolition of student loan debt, as well as the provision of free housing within dormitories and meals to all international students and others in need wishing to remain as residents of their post-secondary institutions during the period of remote instruction.

- We demand that all decisions regarding the viability of reopening schools for in-person learning be determined democratically by rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students, based on the independent assessment of trusted scientists and health experts.

- We demand the immediate retrofitting of all classrooms and school buildings to ensure they have modern, high quality ventilation systems and air purifiers. The costs associated with this must likewise be borne out of the enormous horde of profits accumulated by the financial oligarchy.

- We demand full protection for undocumented immigrant workers and their children, including full income support while they are unable to work in unsafe workplaces. We demand a halt to all imprisonment and deportation by the federal authorities and the

abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Gestapo.

- Halt all nonessential production! Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

The school reopening plan now being imposed on educators is based on several lies.

The first and most fundamental of these lies is that it is possible under conditions of a raging world-wide pandemic to open schools safely.

After the first six weeks of mass school reopenings across the US, in which tens of thousands of infections have been connected to K-12 schools and colleges that have opened up for in-person learning, it has become patently clear that no form of in-person instruction is safe.

The very organization of schools, which bring groups of young people together in confined indoor spaces for prolonged periods of time, renders sustained social distancing practically impossible without the imposition of prison-like conditions on children and adolescents. No attempt to scapegoat young people for the ill-conceived and reckless school reopening policies being promoted by both Republicans and Democrats can hide this fact.

In the case of New York City, home to the largest K-12 school district in the country and an early epicenter of the pandemic, the more recent reduction in infection rates that has been used by Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo to justify the reopening of schools ignores both the ongoing impact of the coronavirus in states across the US and the resurgence of infections in countries that prematurely lifted restrictions such as Israel.

It should be recalled that De Blasio only reluctantly closed down schools in March, under intense pressure from rank-and-file teachers and education workers who were threatening to conduct wildcat strikes and sickouts. A growing body of scientific studies has shown that without the closure of schools, the death toll already exacted by the virus would have been even larger.

Though de Blasio has attempted to justify the reopening of schools with rhetorical ploys referencing the hardships faced by impoverished children, he has proven to be just as zealous in forcing educators and students back into unsafe schools as a condition for the resumption of the extraction of profits from workers and equally willing to carry out the murderous policy of “herd immunity” as his Republican counterparts.

Second, none of the safety measures demanded by teachers, parents and students as conditions for a safe return to schools have been enacted by the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Indeed, Carranza continues to serve as a mouthpiece for the lies emanating from City Hall.

After promising upgrades or renovations to decaying and inadequate ventilation systems across hundreds of school buildings, the DOE orchestrated a series of fraudulent inspections of facilities. Despite the sham character of these inspections,

recently released reports document hundreds of instances of non-existent ventilators as well as inoperative supply and exhaust fans in schools. In a recent town hall with school administrators, Carranza responded to attendees’ concerns by saying that as long as a room had a window, regardless of its condition or position with respect to adequate airflow, it could be used as a classroom.

Additionally, as part of the backroom deal it struck with the UFT to delay the start date of in-person classes by 11 days, the DOE recently announced that testing would be limited to 10–20 percent of teachers and students, who would be randomly selected on a monthly basis, effective October 1, over a week after the start of in-person classes.

The third lie upon which the reopening of schools is based is the claim that the only means to address the deepening fiscal crisis aggravated by the pandemic and thereby avert layoffs of city employees as well as cuts to social programs is to immediately reactivate the economy and mortgage future generations through a massive municipal bond issue, which will put the city budget even more under the direct control of Wall Street investors.

Mayor de Blasio, along with city Democrats and their collaborators in the UFT, have been calling on Albany to allow the city to borrow under this pretext as a means of deflecting all public discussion from the demand that the scores of Wall Street billionaires, who have profited handsomely during the pandemic as millions are cast into the ranks of the unemployed, be made to pay for all the safety measures required to protect the lives of working class residents of the city.

De Blasio’s progressive veneer has been exposed as an utter fraud. While the school and city infrastructure continue to languish in a state of deliberate neglect, and the same children he attempts to use as pawns to justify his homicidal school reopening face increasing levels of poverty, homelessness and distress, de Blasio maintains his unrepentant defense of the wealth acquired by a parasitic financial oligarchy.

A genuine defense of the lives of teachers and students can be carried out only by rank-and-file educators themselves, oriented towards mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class in defense of our lives and safety, and to put an end to the pandemic. We call on all those who agree with this fighting perspective to join our committee today.



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