

Los Angeles educators form rank-and-file safety committee to oppose unsafe school reopening

The Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
21 September 2020

The following is a statement from the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has been established to mobilize opposition to the unsafe conditions in the district, which has 734,000 students and nearly 60,000 teachers and support staff.

California confronts a social, economic and political catastrophe. The Golden State leads the country with the highest number of COVID-19 cases at more than 785,000, with more than 15,000 deaths. In Los Angeles alone, more than 260,000 cases have been reported, with more than 6,300 deaths. All of this has been compounded by unprecedented and increasingly devastating wildfires throughout the West Coast, which have already killed at least 37 people and destroyed thousands of homes across the region.

With an estimated GDP of \$3.1 trillion, California has the fifth largest economy in the world and is home to more than 150 billionaires. At the same time, California has the highest poverty rate in the country.

Before the pandemic, one in three students in the state faced food and housing insecurity, according to the California Students Aid Commission, a figure which is undoubtedly far higher today due to the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic.

Despite this catastrophic situation, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom is allowing local health officials to reopen school districts in counties with case rates below 200 per 100,000. This policy is fully in line with the murderous drive to reopen schools and universities spearheaded by the Trump administration, which has already produced tens of thousands of new coronavirus cases in states across the US.

The threshold used by Newsom—20 times what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines as a low incidence—has been chosen not out of consideration for the safety of students and educators, but in order to provide a justification for reopening. Some 500 schools across the state have already received waivers to reopen. The central concern of Newsom and the entire political establishment is to force children back into schools in order to force their parents back to work to produce profits for the financial oligarchy.

This week, Los Angeles County schools began reopening for small groups of students who require special education and English Learners (EL) assessments and instruction. Under the orders of Democratic Mayor Eric Garcetti, county public health

officials are allowing schools to bring back 10 percent of the total campus enrollment at a time. Over 50 schools have already requested an exemption, including 38 campuses in the Alhambra USD, Centinela Valley Union High, El Monte City, Lennox, Paramount USD, and San Gabriel USD.

The drive to reopen schools in Los Angeles—with 734,000 students and nearly 60,000 teachers and support staff—poses serious issues of life and death. In light of this, teachers and education workers have formed the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which advances the following demands to unite the enormous opposition to the profit-driven school reopening:

1. No to in-person and hybrid learning across all K-12 schools, colleges and universities! Any and all decisions on the viability of in-person instruction must be determined democratically by rank-and-file educators, parents and workers, based on the scientifically grounded guidance of trusted health authorities. The “hybrid” model seeks to establish an “acceptable” level of risk. In reality, it exposes students and teachers to the virus on a part-time basis and is therefore not acceptable.

2. All teachers and students must be provided with the means and technology necessary to carry out fully remote instruction, including high-quality computer hardware and software, webcams, microphones and utilities as well as rent and mortgage protection! An estimated 20 percent of California students, numbering about 1.2 million, do not have internet access in their homes. This is a basic necessity in the 21st century. High-speed internet access must be provided to all families free of charge.

3. Educators who choose to teach from home must be guaranteed full income, unlimited sick leave, full medical coverage, and must be allowed to return to their jobs once safe conditions have been reestablished. Teachers should not have to choose between their health and their jobs. Those who have been forced to resign or retire, such as those with high seniority or who may be immuno-compromised, must be given the option of returning to their positions if they desire.

4. We demand full income protection, an indefinite rent and mortgage moratorium, and medical care for all parents who need to remain at home to facilitate their children’s education and for all those who have been cast into the ranks of the

unemployed. 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.

5. Wherever schools have been reopened, we demand the provision of rapid-response, on-site daily testing for all students, staff, and faculty. Every site must be fully staffed with registered nurses working with administrators to ensure safety protocols are 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.

6. Schools cannot be reopened until they have undergone air purification and ventilation retrofitting and are sanitized daily with the most advanced cleaning technology. Decades of defunding public education have resulted in the layoff of thousands of custodial staff and decaying infrastructure. Before the pandemic, Los Angeles schools were already severely understaffed with custodians and maintenance workers, restrooms ran out of soap and paper towels, and classrooms were habitually unsanitary. In Long Beach Unified, a rat and insect infestation caused teachers and students to contract scabies.

7. We demand daily reporting to the community on COVID-19 testing results and the full disclosure of where positive cases happen. We uphold the right to free speech and the protection of whistleblowers, including teachers, students and staff. California, like the majority of states, is not releasing data on school outbreaks. No one can return to a school building without a negative test.

8. 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 and their own safety committees to enforce safe conditions. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full salary and access to free health care, including regular COVID-19 testing.

9. We demand the immediate freezing of college tuition and abolition of student loan debt, as well as the provision of free housing and meals to all students, including international students and others in need who wish to remain as residents of their post-secondary institutions during the period of remote instruction. Universities are opening up across the nation with massive spikes, forcing thousands of students to isolate in dormitories in prison-like conditions. This must be stopped.

10. We demand full protection for undocumented immigrant students, 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 and its brutal and criminal operations.

11. 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 an independent assessment of trusted scientists and health experts. We will not accept these deadly working conditions. Our demands are based on

science, and they are not negotiable.

Each of these demands must be fully paid for by the corporate and financial oligarchy that controls the entire political system in California, among the most unequal states in the US. During the first three months of the pandemic, the state's 154 billionaires collectively, including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, amassed \$174.4 billion, almost as much as the entire \$202.1 billion state budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year. At the other pole of society, there were at least 150,000 homeless people, and 4.7 million adults and 2.0 million children in the state lived in low-income households affected by food insecurity in 2019.

The interests of teachers are the same as those of students and parents. Education, from preschool to university levels, involves teachers, substitute teachers, specialists, nurses, office staff, counselors, administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, electricians, construction workers, psychologists, special education teachers, music and art teachers and volunteers working together with parents and students.

The Democratic Party's best allies, the unions, have done everything in their power to facilitate the process of school reopening, as part of a strategy to return parents to work. While the authorities decided to delay full in-person instruction—fearing this would provoke a revolt by educators—the California Teachers Association (CTA) and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) are now working with state and local authorities to find a mechanism to open LA schools as early as possible.

In reopening schools for small groups of students, district officials are setting a precedent and using special education and ELL instructors and students as a wedge to fully reopen the schools. The UTLA has only “expressed concerns” about these reopening policies while doing everything it can to prevent a strike by its 35,000 members.

In the LA metropolitan area, Los Alamitos Unified is the first public school district in Orange County to reopen for in-person instruction due to a state waiver. A growing number of districts across the region will soon announce similar plans.

Our committee bases itself on science, and we warn that the current reopening plans are extremely dangerous and will lead to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus through the population. We call on all students, educators, and workers to join the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the fight to prepare for a general strike of the entire working class to halt the reopening of schools, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.



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