

Hundreds of Kenosha, Wisconsin teachers call in sick to force schools to close

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Starting Monday, 276 teachers in Kenosha Unified School District (KUSD) in Wisconsin engaged in a sickout strike in opposition to increasing COVID-19 outbreaks and deadly conditions in the school district. The majority of teachers who called in sick did so on Sunday evening, forcing the district to close seven schools and switch to remote learning for this entire week.

With 104,170 COVID-19 cases and 1,251 deaths since the onset of the pandemic, Wisconsin has had a major surge in cases in recent weeks. In the past week alone, there have been a reported 4,200 new positive cases and 34 deaths. Among those who died last week was Heidi Hussli, a 47-year-old Bay Port, Wisconsin, German teacher who had been teaching in person under a hybrid model just prior to contracting the virus.

KUSD is the only large public school district in Wisconsin offering in-person education to start the academic year. The state is now averaging 1,792 new cases a day, with a 16.7 percent test positivity rate for the past week, among the highest in the US. In addition to K-12 schools reporting outbreaks, college campuses, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, have become major hot spots adding to the surge in cases throughout the state.

As of Sunday, KUSD had seven confirmed cases of students and three staff members across multiple school sites. With at least three positive cases reported at Indian Trail High School and Academy, at least 16 staff members and 100 students are in quarantine through September 30. There are also reports of positive cases at Tremper High School, Lakeview Technology Academy, Prairie Lane Elementary and Bullen Middle School.

Each of these schools, except Prairie Lane Elementary and Bullen Middle School, has been closed

for the week by the sickout. In addition, Bradford High School, Harborside Academy, Lincoln Middle School, and Reuther Central High School were also closed due to the sickout.

The new school year began on September 14, with parents and students given a choice of either in-person or remote learning. Roughly 58 percent of students returned to schools for in-person instruction, and within days confirmed cases began cropping up within the schools.

Teachers, parents and students have been protesting the reopening plans since August 31, after the district rescinded its plan to reopen with only remote learning and decided to offer the choice of in-person instruction under a hybrid model. Teachers, parents and students have protested at board meetings to voice their opposition, holding signs that read, “One student or teacher funeral is too many” and “Don’t make me choose between students and my health.”

The sickout appears to have been organized independently from the Kenosha Education Association (KEA), which distanced itself from the initiative taken by rank-and-file teachers. In a statement released Monday evening, the KEA did not claim responsibility for organizing hundreds of teachers who called in sick and the union’s Facebook page had no posts about the sickout, let alone any statements of support for the brave action by teachers.

School officials were notified Sunday night about the mass absences by teachers, and the district is quickly moving to victimize outspoken teachers and those who helped coordinate the sickout. Tanya Ruder, chief communications officer for the KUSD, told local media that absences that aren’t considered “legitimate” will be investigated.

In a Tuesday night update to its original Facebook

post from Sunday, the district reported the results of its initial investigation, writing, “Of the 276 teacher absences, 151 were preapproved with a valid reason, such as FMLA, jury duty or bereavement leave. The remaining 115 teacher absences were sick days that have since been researched. Of those who responded to date, 17 reported COVID-like symptoms and 83 reported other reasons, such as doctor appointments, sick child, etc. The remaining 15 individuals have yet to respond and the district will continue to follow up with them.”

There is enormous opposition in Wisconsin, across the US and internationally to the campaign to reopen schools. On the KUSD Facebook post, one commentator wrote, “Stop this in person class nonsense. [...] The administration making the decisions are sitting at home in their pajamas or holed up in their offices at the well isolated “ivory palace” in 52nd street! [...] Stop this nonsense and do the right thing. Stop in person classes now.”

In South Carolina—where there are now 622 student or staff COVID-19 cases tied to the reopening of K-12 schools, including 90 since last Friday—the Facebook group “SC for Ed” is organizing a statewide sickout strike to be held today to protest unsafe conditions and low pay.

In Livingston Parish, Louisiana, the local teachers union is organizing a one-day sickout today, in an effort to placate growing opposition among educators. In California’s Irvine Unified School District, a petition calling for a halt to plans to reopen schools, has garnered over 2,000 signatures of teachers, parents and community members.

In Greece, high school students in several cities across the country began occupying schools last week to protest the unsafe return to classrooms. Across Europe, South America, Africa, and every continent where governments have rushed to reopen schools, there is mounting opposition among educators and a determination to fight.

This opposition to in-person instruction and the victimization of teachers must become consciously organized and directed toward mobilizing the entire working class against the back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns. This requires the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, which operate independently of the unions and fight to unite educators

and broader sections of workers in a common struggle against this homicidal policy.

Decades of plant shutdowns by the auto and other manufacturing industries have ravaged the school system and the living standards of workers in Kenosha, a city located halfway between Milwaukee and Chicago where nearly one-fifth of its 100,000 residents live below the official poverty rate. The city, which is overseen by the Democratic Party, experienced the explosion of social tensions last month following the police shooting of 29-year-old Jacob Blake, which left him paralyzed from the waist down.

With preventable deaths soaring over 200,000 people and the economic and social crisis intensifying across the US, protests, strikes and other job actions will increasingly spread throughout every section of the working class. The logic of the political situation is leading towards a nationwide general strike to close schools and halt all nonessential production, in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.

The critical task is to build a network of independent, rank-and-file safety committees in every city and state, to unify educators, parents, students and the entire working class. Only through the formation of such committees, independent of the Republicans and Democrats, and their backers in the unions, will workers be able to assert their own interests and carry out the broadest struggle possible.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to help coordinate this work in the US, with local and statewide committees formed in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, Texas and Florida. We urge all educators and parents in and across the country to join the committee and contact us today to establish a local or statewide committee in your region to carry forward this struggle.



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