

Teachers across the US engage in sickout strikes to close schools

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Protests and strikes continue to erupt across the United States by educators opposed to the homicidal push to return students to classrooms, which has resulted in at least 24,358 new COVID-19 infections tied to K-12 school reopenings. Since the end of July, when schools began to reopen en masse across the country, at least 30 educators have died from COVID-19.

This week, educators in South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and Wisconsin have responded to the unfolding crisis with sickouts, in some cases compelling entire school districts to suspend in-person instruction.

South Carolina

In South Carolina, the Facebook group “SC for Ed” organized a statewide sickout strike on Wednesday to protest unsafe conditions and low pay. While the total number of teachers that participated has not been reported, hundreds of teachers planned to take part in the protest. One teacher commented in the Facebook group, “I hate it when people say we’re abandoning our students. We’re fighting FOR our students! We’re fighting to keep top talented teachers in SC instead of losing them to GA & NC where they’re better paid and treated!”

Like their counterparts across the country and internationally, teachers in South Carolina are overwhelmingly hostile to the unsafe reopening of schools. A survey of more than 4,000 teachers and school staff across the state found that 71 percent disapproved or strongly disapproved of the state’s handling of the pandemic and the reopening of schools. An astounding 27 percent are considering leaving their jobs over concerns about health and safety. Adding insult to injury, the annual pay increase that teachers receive has been frozen until January.

Already, at least 622 cases of coronavirus among students and staff have been tied to the reopening of K-12 schools in the state. On September 7, just three days after being diagnosed with the virus, third grade teacher Demetria “Demi” Bannister, only 28 years old, died of COVID-19 complications.

According to the Associated Press, there were 293 new cases per 100,000 people in South Carolina over the past two weeks, putting the state in the top 10 for new cases per capita. There are over 141,000 reported cases in the state and 3,243 deaths. On

Wednesday, the reported seven-day average positivity rate was 11.1, indicating a high degree of community transmission.

Florida

On Monday, when campuses reopened in the School District of Palm Beach County, 944 teachers stayed home. On Tuesday, 894, or nearly 1 in 13, continued to stay home, using sick days or personal time. Already, 64 teachers have resigned in the district, 82 have taken leaves of absence and 278 have been approved to work remotely.

Struggling to find substitutes, who share the same health and safety concerns as teachers, schools are reportedly asking teachers to supervise multiple classrooms at once or sending other employees to monitor the students. In many cases, students are directed to wait in unsupervised classrooms, or “overflow” rooms, until their next period begins.

The school district also faces an ongoing class action lawsuit. The plaintiffs include six school district employees and the husband of a teacher. The lawsuit seeks an emergency injunction to temporarily stop the school district from forcing teachers and staff to return to the buildings until “independent health officials say it is safe to do so.” The experience of the FEA lawsuit in Leon County serves as a warning against placing any confidence in the judicial system to decide the fate of thousands of educators and students.

Florida has 682,370 confirmed cases and 13,618 deaths, and the positivity rate has surpassed 5.0 percent over the past two weeks, reaching 5.88 percent. School districts have also reported being told to stop releasing data about cases in schools. However, the available data demonstrates the consequences of the reopening.

As the WSWs previously reported, “According to new state data, more than 12,000 Florida children 17 and under have been infected with COVID-19 since schools first began opening their doors. The pediatric cases since August 10 represent a 20 percent increase, and pediatric hospitalizations also jumped almost 20 percent over the same period.”

Louisiana

On Wednesday, hundreds of teachers in Livingston Parish, Louisiana called in sick to protest the district's handling of reopening schools while the pandemic rages out of control, as well as the lack of communication and support from the school board, inadequate pay and a rise in teachers' health insurance costs.

The local union, the Livingston Federation of Teachers, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), called for the "day of action." Rather than working to connect the erupting struggles of educators across the state, let alone across the country, the union sought to contain the teachers' anger through an isolated, one-day local action.

In St. Landry Parish, teachers are threatening to strike if the school district refuses to reverse its plan to subcontract teachers for virtual learning through a service called Edgenuity. Earlier this month, teachers in Pointe Coupee Parish participated in a nearly weeklong sickout to protest a delay in the \$6,000 raise they were set to receive due to a voter-approved property tax increase. In August, the Pointe Coupee Parish school board decided to postpone the full raise until 2021, instead giving a \$3,000 raise for this year.

In response to the strike, the board's president Tom Nelson promised that they would revisit the issue at the meeting later this month and expected the full raise would be approved. Teachers stopped their strike temporarily but warned that they would resume should the board fail to keep its word.

Louisiana has recorded a total of 162,214 cases and 5,218 deaths. Livingston Parish has recorded 3,726 cases and 74 deaths and is adjacent to East Baton Rouge Parish, which has the second highest case count in the state, with 14,983 cases and 439 deaths. At least 256 cases have been confirmed at K-12 schools across the state since reopening.

Wisconsin

Hundreds of teachers began a sickout Monday in Kenosha, Wisconsin, forcing the school district to close seven schools and switch to virtual learning for the entire week. The Kenosha Unified School District has already confirmed seven cases of COVID-19 among students and three among staff. Wisconsin has already lost one K-12 teacher to the virus, Heidi Hussli, 47, who taught German in Bay Port.

The sickout in Kenosha was organized independently of the union, the Kenosha Education Association (KEA). Union President Tanya Kitts-Lewinski spoke at a school board meeting Tuesday and barely acknowledged the sickout, mentioning instead a "surge in teacher absences." Despite speaking against in-person instruction, unsafe working conditions, and the inaction of the school board, she and the union have refused to endorse or support the teachers.

New York

New York City, the largest school district in the country, is facing a disastrous scenario as it prepares to reopen. The city is scrambling to hire between 6,000 and 7,000 extra teachers before middle and high schools open on October 1.

On Monday, 90,000 prekindergarten and special education students returned to school. Last week, over 60 teachers were diagnosed with COVID-19 after they reported to school buildings to prepare for the opening of school. This followed an announcement last Thursday by Mayor Bill de Blasio that face-to-face instruction would be delayed by one week for the majority of the district's students.

The delay was announced after a meeting with United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew and other union representatives, who are conspiring with de Blasio to reopen schools, in order to set a precedent for Democrat-led cities across the US to reopen.

A delay of seven days will in no way curtail the spread of the virus among students, teachers and staff. Rather, the decision was a calculated maneuver by the Democratic mayor and the UFT, who are scuttling to prevent an explosion of independent action by educators that threatens to break free from their constraints.

As opposition grows among educators and the broader working class against the back-to-school and back-to-work campaigns, driven by the financial concerns of the ruling class, the efforts to conceal the extent and severity of the pandemic become ever more conspicuous. Just days after releasing guidelines stating that the coronavirus is primarily transmitted through airborne particles, which can linger in the air for hours and travel more than six feet, the CDC suddenly removed this information from its website.

Teachers and other school workers must take matters into their own hands. The actions in Kenosha, Palm Beach, Livingston Parish and South Carolina show that educators have the power to halt the reopening of schools, but in order to succeed these efforts must become organized on a national and international scale and linked up with the struggles of the entire working class.

The Democrats, Republicans and the unions have all worked together to carry out the back-to-school campaign in one form or another. The imperative facing educators is to build a network of independent rank-and-file safety committees in every city and state to unify educators, parents, students and the broader working class.

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 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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