

Safety committee denounces reopening of New York City schools

Stop the spread of COVID-19! Build rank-and-file safety committees to save lives! Prepare a nationwide strike to close unsafe schools!

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
1 October 2020

Hundreds of thousands of middle and high school students in New York City are being sent back to classrooms for in-person instruction today as the pandemic continues to spread throughout the school system and the city. The following is a statement adopted Wednesday night by the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

The Mayor Bill de Blasio and the Department of Education (DOE), with the full collaboration of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), are resuming in-person instruction with complete disregard for the safety and lives of hundreds of thousands of students, educators and our families. This action can only produce a catastrophe in a city where so many lives have already been lost.

The percentage of those tested who are positive for the coronavirus has increased to 3.25 percent, and it is even higher in the working class areas of Queens and Brooklyn. Some city suburbs now have rates as high as 30 percent. Under these conditions, the outcome of reopening the schools will be mass sickness from the virus and death on the scale of March and April or even worse.

The opening of the New York City schools, the largest district in the nation, is being used to set a precedent to reopen Los Angeles, Chicago and other major urban school districts that are still teaching remotely. Whatever their rhetorical differences with Trump, Democrats like de Blasio, Cuomo and Biden fully support the reopening of schools and businesses in order to restart the flow of corporate profits. They are indifferent to the human cost of their “herd immunity” policy and even welcome the

killing off of older workers whom the financial oligarchy considers too costly to keep alive.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee opposes this homicidal policy and calls on teachers, other school employees, students, parents and workers throughout the city to form safety committees in your local schools and communities to take the actions necessary to defend our lives. These committees must expose unsafe conditions in schools, inform the public about outbreaks, enforce health and safety conditions, and if immediate improvements, approved by these safety committees, are not put in place, prepare a citywide strike to shut the schools and protect lives.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the local safety committees we are encouraging to be established are completely independent from the UFT. In response to the growing public outrage, UFT President Michael Mulgrew is urging de Blasio to “consider” closing 80 schools in zip codes with the highest infection rates. This is a fraud. The disease does not recognize zip codes, and all 1,800 schools in the city threaten to be vectors for the spread of the contagion.

Independent rank-and-file safety committees should take the initiative to inspect buildings with medical professionals and HVAC specialists to ensure that air filtration systems do not spread the virus. The committees must enforce small enough class sizes to ensure proper social distancing. They must guarantee that adequate personal protective equipment is supplied. Information about conditions in each school should be widely publicized by these committees on social media and in the

form of leaflets distributed in working class neighborhoods.

At the same time, these committees must oppose the efforts by de Blasio and the DOE to exploit the pandemic to force out older, higher-paid teachers and replace them with substitutes who are little more than temps. Students and their families must be provided with the latest computer technology and high-speed internet access to guarantee the highest quality of education in their homes, instead of the haphazard methods being used by the district to sabotage remote learning and force students and teachers back into infected schools.

The economic crisis in the city—with more than one million jobless New Yorkers—is being exploited to pressure workers to return to unsafe workplaces and slash even more money from social services. In an open letter de Blasio, the Partnership for New York City, an organization of real estate tycoons and the city's financial oligarchy, instructed the mayor to implement law-and-order measures and reject demands for support to the unemployed and working class renters.

The fight to protect health and safety must be combined with a fight against the massive austerity measures being prepared that would include the layoff of tens of thousands of public workers who have sacrificed to protect their fellow citizens during this pandemic. There are ample resources to guarantee the jobs, health and well-being of workers in the city instead of the multitrillion-dollar Wall Street bailout Congress passed to enrich the billionaires. These resources must be directed to meet society's needs.

We believe that the logic of a struggle to protect the health and safety of the population leads toward a general strike, which must be the goal of this committee.

Our committee further calls for the rescinding of all cuts to public education and other vital social programs and for a sharp increase in taxes on the wealthy to:

- Hire and train thousands of educators and nurses;
- Provide high-quality computer equipment and free broadband to all students who are learning remotely;
- Provide full financial support to parents and caregivers who must stay at home to care for their children while schools are closed;

- Mass testing and rapid, effective contact tracing for all those found to be infected; and

- Full medical treatment for the ill and full protection for healthcare givers, transit and logistics, and all other essential workers.

Action by New York City teachers to fight for these demands would have an electrifying effect on educators across the country and the world. Protests and job actions against unsafe reopening plans are spreading across the world, from Greece to South Carolina, Arkansas and Louisiana. Because the pandemic has a global character, it is imperative for educators rank-and-file safety committees to link up with similar committees formed internationally.

Throughout the US and the world there is growing opposition against the criminal response to the pandemic, the explosion of social inequality, endless police killings and the danger of dictatorship. Trump has responded by urging his right-wing supporters to use violence and back his attempts to remain in power even if he loses the election. As for Biden and the Democrats, they are prepared to capitulate to Trump because they fear nothing more than a movement of the working class that would threaten the wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite.

But that is exactly what must be done. The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all teachers, school employees, students, parents and other workers to join this fight to mobilize the full strength of the working class to protect our lives and our social and democratic rights. We urge you to contact us to join this fight today.



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