

Partial closures in New York City as infections spread throughout US schools

Renae Cassimeda**5 October 2020**

Throughout the United States, school reopenings have been a complete disaster. More than 30 K-12 educators have died since schools began reopening in late July, and at least 39,000 students and school employees have been infected across the country.

On October 1, one day after her 58th birthday, first grade bilingual teacher Olga Quiroga died after battling COVID-19. Quiroga taught at Funston Elementary and had worked in the Chicago Public School District (CPS) for over 30 years. Although CPS began the school year fully online for most students, Quiroga became infected after being forced to make a number of trips to her school for required pre-service workdays, including a back-to-school event where she met her students' parents and handed out supplies for the upcoming academic year.

While sick at home, Quiroga continued to teach her students virtually as the school year began. After a week of worsening symptoms while teaching virtually, she was taken by her daughter to the emergency room and never left the hospital. There have now been nine reported deaths of CPS workers since the onset of the pandemic.

Despite the surge in infections and deaths among educators across the country, major school districts that have started online are now pushing for the full resumption of in-person learning, which will vastly accelerate the spread of the pandemic.

In **New York City**, mass school reopenings combined with the easing of social distancing restrictions in recent weeks have led to a rapid rise in infections across the city. At least 145 teachers and 38 students have tested positive for COVID-19, and the average infection rate throughout the city has nearly doubled in the past week, from one to 1.75 percent in the past week.

On Sunday, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that all non-essential businesses, as well as public and private schools, will close this Wednesday, October 7, in neighborhoods with a three percent infection rate for seven consecutive days. The closures will impact roughly half a million people across nine zip codes and encompass parts of

at least 20 neighborhoods within the city, with roughly 100 public and 200 non-public schools closing in the largest school district in the country.

With well-grounded fears that the school openings are leading to a resurgence of the virus in the city, which has already lost 25,000 people to the deadly contagion, de Blasio is collaborating with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to try to get ahead of the growing demands for the complete shutdown of the district. The closure of the 1.1-million-student school district would be a major blow to back-to-school and back-to-work campaign spearheaded by the Trump administration with the support on the state and local level by Democrats like de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo.

The number of public schools being closed is less than six percent of the city's 1,722 public schools. The closures, moreover, are set to take effect Wednesday, not today, supposedly to allow students to ensure they have devices and receive instruction from teachers for remote learning on Monday and Tuesday. Without any scientific evidence, de Blasio insisted, "We do not see a nexus to the public schools."

In nearby **Long Island**, New York—with 124 public school districts and 420,000 students—there is growing denunciations of the New York State Education Department (NYSED) for withholding information about the spread of infections. One teacher told the WSWS, "My doctor advised me not to return for in-person classes because I am at high risk. Shortly after the school year began, my district told me I could either physically return, even though the students I was assigned are all remote or take medical leave for the academic year. I know dozens of other teachers in the same situation.

"They try to justify forcing us back for in-person classes by saying that it's about what's best for the students. That's a lie. There have already been positive cases among students and the response has been for teachers and students to just return the next day as if nothing happened.

"I support building rank-and-file safety committees. The

unions are not only not doing anything to protect us, most teachers don't even trust them because they've sold us out for so many years. We feel vulnerable because they keep us isolated. I think teachers need new organizations to defend our common interests."

In **Florida**, Miami-Dade County Public School began in-person instruction today for pre-K through first grade, as well as students with disabilities. The school board made a last-minute decision last Tuesday to reopen schools after Florida's right-wing Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran demanded that the district reopen on October 5 or face up to \$300 million in funding cuts. Similar to New York City and other districts, the rest of the student population will be phased in over the coming weeks. Similarly, Broward County Schools in Tallahassee and other districts will also reopen this week under a similar model.

According to the Florida Department of Health, a total of 4,689 COVID-19 cases have been tied to the reopening of Florida's K-12 and post-secondary schools since September 6. Just this past week, over 1,300 students and staff have been quarantined in Central Florida public schools and Pinellas County Public Schools. Nevertheless, Governor Ron DeSantis stated Friday that closing schools in the spring might have been one of the nation's biggest "public health mistakes."

In **Wisconsin**, a major epicenter of the virus in the US, the death of two Wisconsin teachers in recent weeks has provoked enormous opposition among educators and parents to school reopenings. In response, teachers unions in Racine, Madison, Milwaukee, Kenosha and Green Bay have appealed to the Department of Health Services to prohibit in-person schooling. At the same time, the unions have made it clear they will take no action if their appeal is predictably rejected. **Ohio** teachers in Gahanna-Jefferson Public School District voted Thursday to strike on October 13 in opposition to lack of safety measures and instructional models to be implemented as schools reopen for in-person instruction. The district plans to bring back at least half of its student population this month and communicated to parents and the community that students who remain home will watch a live stream of the in-person class. Teachers argue that the proposed model for distance learning will compromise students' learning and impose additional workload on teachers who will be responsible for teaching students both in-person and online.

In **Washington, DC**, thirteen schools within District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) will open face-to-face in the coming weeks, despite opposition from teachers who have expressed deep concerns over in-person learning. The district and city administration have responded by saying in-person instruction is voluntary, while DC mayor Muriel

Bowser has called for a full reopening of schools by November. DCPS teachers protested outside Bowser's home on Saturday, calling for a halt to the reopening plans.

In nearby **Fairfax, Virginia**, over 650 teachers in the district have been compelled to return for in-person instruction. Last week, teachers were given 48 hours to decide if they will return to their classrooms for face-to-face instruction starting today. Teachers and support staff were provided four choices: return in-person; submit an American with Disabilities Act request, if they are high-risk; request an unpaid leave of absence; or resign or retire.

The pandemic is being used to purge older, higher-paid teachers from the profession, sharply increase workloads for teachers forced to provide in-person and remote instruction simultaneously, and prepare an historic program of austerity, whether Trump or Biden is in the White House.

Last week, Detroit Federation of Teachers President Terrence Martin repeatedly said, "We are in a pandemic" to bully teachers into accepting a contract which will keep teachers' wages roughly the same as they were in 1985 and to replace step increases for new hires, based on seniority, with merit pay schemes tied to testing and teacher evaluations. From Detroit, to New York City, to California and across the country, the unions are playing an absolutely criminal role in aiding this deadly policy, promoting the fraud that schools can be reopened safely while the pandemic spirals out of control.

Teachers and school workers must break from the stranglehold of the unions and build their own, independent rank-and-file safety committees in order to fight for their lives. There is mass opposition to the opening of schools and a growing sentiment for broad-based struggle to halt the spread of the pandemic. Rank-and-file safety committees have already been established in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, Texas, and Florida. We urge all teachers and workers to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee network, and join or build a safety committee in your area .



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