

Teachers unions stifle opposition to Louisiana school reopenings

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After receiving widespread complaints from teachers across East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, about the conditions in their schools, the teachers union East Baton Rouge Association of Educators (EBRAE) organized a one-day “day of action” sickout strike on Monday in an effort to let off steam among educators. The local union’s president, Anita Augustus, called on educators to stay home, with the stated goal of prompting deeper cleaning.

Around 360 teachers took part in the work stoppage, forcing the school district to close five schools due to staffing shortages. For the remainder of the district’s 76 schools, Monday was the first day that pre-K-5th graders returned for daily in-person instruction. The schools began in-person instruction two days per week on September 14. Middle and high school students are slated to return to campus on October 19.

Chief among the complaints, according to Augustus, were reports of buildings not being cleaned thoroughly and a lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies for the classrooms. In a Facebook video she posted announcing the strike, Augustus said she received emails “with pictures of full trashcans that had not been emptied, dirt in the classrooms, and just the whole gamut.”

An art teacher who joined the sickout on Monday said to local news station *WAFB9*, “you can tell when they haven’t wiped anything, you can tell when they haven’t swept because it will still be on the floor, trash cans will still be full, they won’t take the trash out, things like that.”

In response to the complaints, the school system sent an email stating that the district was “pushing for improvement” from Aramark, the company that oversees the district’s janitorial system. A few changes were announced in the cleaning protocols, including

extending the workday for Aramark staff to oversee the work by night-cleaning contractors, school visits and inspections by Aramark leadership, and daily meetings with all cleaning sub-contractors.

As important as cleaning and sanitation are for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, there are no safety protocols or cleaning guidelines that will prevent infections and deaths short of halting and reversing the resumption of in-person teaching and learning. Teachers must not hold any illusions in the union’s attempt to quell rank-and-file anger with a singular, isolated action that does not even raise the demand to end in-person instruction.

Speaking to the Louisiana Joint House Committee on Education and Health and Welfare, Dr. Jimmy Guidry, State Health Officer of Louisiana, acknowledged that testing had dramatically decreased and that school children were unlikely to be tested. He stated, “There’s a false sense that we don’t have much of it around. It’s out there, but we’re not testing nearly as much as we were before. And we’re not testing kids, where most of it might be right now because they’re in school and they’re being exposed.”

The peak number of tests conducted in September was only 57 percent of the peak number in August, indicating that the current spread of the virus is largely unknown. The limited data available indicates the virus is spreading widely among children since schools reopened. *The Advocate* reported that “in the week ending Sept. 23 — the most recent set of data on the age of those infected — 12.2% of all new coronavirus patients were between the ages of 6 and 17. That’s the highest rate for that age group since the start of the pandemic and a roughly 47% increase from the proportion of cases in that range over the summer.”

Statewide, the data available to the public about

school outbreaks is also being deliberately censored. Thirty percent of the 1,727 public and private K-12 schools are not accounted for on the Louisiana Department of Health's COVID-19 website. As of September 30, those that were reporting confirmed 823 cases among students and staff.

Meanwhile, Livingston Parish Schools System announced it is reducing its reporting of COVID-19 infections to bi-weekly from weekly. The change comes as the district has moved into "Phase Three" in which all K-12 students are allowed to be on campus five days per week. Superintendent Joe Murphy said that 94 percent of the district's 26,000 students are receiving in-person instruction. Already there are about 120 students and staff quarantined due to infection or exposure.

Livingston Parish School officials are increasingly at odds with educators. On September 23, under the direction of the Livingston Federation of Teachers (LFT), over 300 teachers participated in another one-day sickout protest, similar to the one called by EBRAE. One of the demands raised by the union was the creation of a permanent council made up by teachers from each school in the district, to meet with the superintendent and school board at least monthly.

Tensions came to a head at the October 2 school board meeting, when the board rejected the teacher-proposed advisory council. Instead, they voted in favor of creating the Livingston Parish Teachers Association, proposed by Assistant Superintendent Stephen Parrill as an alternative structure to the union under the control of the district. Rather than members being elected by other teachers, teacher representatives would be "chosen by certified personnel based at that school and approved by the principal." The teachers present at the meeting walked out in response to the vote.

The anger felt by educators in Louisiana, as well as the will to create teacher-led organizations is a healthy response to the criminal school reopening policy being carried out across the US and internationally. However, it is a trap for educators to put their trust in the local or national teachers' unions to carry out this work for them.

The experiences in East Baton Rouge and Livingston Parishes, as well as in New York City, Detroit, and across the country, show that the unions seek not to address the underlying forces that are dictating the back-

to-school campaign, nor do they try to combine the struggles of educators across district and state lines. Instead, the local unions, which are chapters of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), have been instrumental in carrying out the deadly policy of returning students and educators back into classrooms.

As the WSWS wrote in late July, at its biennial convention the AFT passed a resolution that stated outright it would only support "local and/or state affiliate safety strikes on a case-by-case basis as a last resort." In other words, it would do everything in its power to *prevent* a unified, nation-wide strike against the policy of the Democrats and Republicans.

All educators and school personnel who seek to fight against the unsafe reopening of schools must build new forms of worker organizations that are independent of the unions and corporate-controlled parties, who are responsible for the back-to-school drive. We call on educators to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and to attend our next online meeting at 3pm EDT this Saturday, October 10.



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