

Pennsylvania educators, bus drivers and school workers launch rank-and-file safety committee to put an end to in-person instruction

Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
9 October 2020

We announce today the formation of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the school reopenings enacted by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and supported by Democratic and Republican state and local officials. Face-to-face instruction places the lives of educators, school workers, students, and the broader community at grave risk. These measures are not meant to help young people, whose health and lives are placed in jeopardy, but rather to force the entire working class back on the job for the sake of corporate profits.

The resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic is in full swing across the US and internationally. It has been driven by the bipartisan policy of unlimited financial support to Wall Street while forcing workers to choose between destitution, hunger and homelessness, on the one hand, or returning to unsafe schools and businesses on the other.

Pennsylvania has a patchwork of 500 school districts, each choosing independently whether to open with face-to-face learning, online learning, or a hybrid model that combines the two. Many teachers returning for face-to-face instruction have reported that they have been given one face mask and a bottle of “blue liquid” as a disinfectant, while others have been provided nothing.

The Wolf administration’s Department of Education has refused to issue any safety mandates for reopenings. State guidelines which restrict event sizes to 20 percent of room capacity exempt classrooms. Years of budget cuts to education have already ballooned class sizes, with 30 or more students routinely packed into classrooms.

As a result of relaxed or nonexistent guidelines and years of budget cuts, there is a lack of mask-wearing among students and staff, no social distancing, and no proper disinfecting in reopened schools. Some districts refuse to test students for COVID-19, with children who report to the nurse being sent back into the classrooms.

School bus drivers have been told to keep their windows down and to use a nine-inch fan to keep themselves from getting infected. In bad weather, even such rudimentary measures will be impossible. No additional funds have been provided to increase the number of buses to reduce overcrowding.

Governor Wolf’s Department of Health (DOH) is not tracking the number of cases in schools and is seeking to cover up the extent of the infections. In the few cases where information is reported, the DOH refuses to release infection numbers by school district, falsely claiming that Pennsylvania privacy laws prevent the release of this vital public health information. This was the same excuse used to cover up information about mass infections and deaths in Pennsylvania nursing homes.

Since the reopening of schools and businesses, COVID-19 cases are

rising throughout the state. Last Thursday, Pennsylvania reported its highest daily increase in infections since May 8 and the second day in a row with more than 1,300 new cases. Currently, over 165,000 people have been infected in the state, and over 8,299 people have died.

While COVID-19 deaths overwhelmingly strike an older population, the long-term implications of the disease among all ages are still not known. Far too many youths have also been fatally stricken and are clearly transmitting the virus to the community at large.

On September 9, 20-year-old California University of Pennsylvania student Jamain Stephens Jr. died from a blood clot in his heart after contracting COVID-19. Since the return to the classrooms, dozens of educators nationally have died from the coronavirus.

Penn State University (PSU) has reported 2,964 cases since the start of the fall term, which included face-to-face instruction; over 500 are still considered active. Under these conditions, PSU is resuming football on October 24, which will inevitably broaden viral transmission among players and students. With over \$100 million in annual revenue from football, PSU is unconscionably prioritizing money over safety.

The University of Pittsburgh has reported 259 cases, quarantining infected students in three floors of one of their massive 22-floor dorms. Those students cannot leave their rooms except to go to the bathroom or for medical reasons, with food being delivered to them.

Next month, the state’s two largest K-12 school districts, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, both under Democratic Party control, plan to reopen schools with in-person learning.

Both the Trump administration and Democrats have adopted the homicidal “herd immunity” strategy, premised on mass infections and deaths, and a universal return to work and school. The implications for school staff are ominous. According to researchers at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 42-51 percent of education workers are at increased risk or “potentially increased risk” for severe COVID-19 symptoms. In addition, among US adults who have risk factors for severe COVID-19, about 34-44 million have direct or household links to schools.

Meanwhile, Democratic- and Republican-run school boards are so intent on forcing teachers into the classroom that they have systematically refused or sandbagged educators’ legal rights to leave or other accommodation under OSHA, FMLA, ADA and the CARES Act.

The main unions who falsely claim to represent school workers—the American Federation of Teachers Pennsylvania (AFT-P), the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the Teamsters—have criminally enabled the drive of big

business to force workers back to schools and job sites, vouchsafing plans for a “safe” reopening of schools and the broader economy.

Further compounding this homicidal role, union officials are often joining with school officials in denying educators their rights to leave, in some cases labeling teachers “just lazy.”

The unions have failed to mount any defense of educators. If they refuse to fight now, when our lives are directly on the line, they will never fight for us. We, therefore, have no recourse but to take matters into our own hands. We urge Pennsylvania educators, parents, students, and workers to join and help build the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which will fight for the following demands:

- **The immediate closure of all face-to-face learning in public, private, and charter schools!** It is impossible to “safely” open schools during a raging pandemic. The loss of life and the permanent physical and emotional damage to students who spread the disease to teachers, staff, parents and grandparents dwarfs any disruption caused by online learning.

- **Full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction!** The trillions handed over to the rich must be redistributed to provide universal access to high-speed internet, food security, mental health care, special education support and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning for every student and educator. In this time of severe trauma, it is especially necessary to provide a full complement of arts instruction.

- **All teachers and students must be provided with the technology and training necessary to carry out fully remote instruction, including the provision of high-quality computer hardware and software and all other accessories.** These programs must be expedited in rural areas, Native American reservations and the most impoverished working-class neighborhoods, which the ruling class has left to rot for decades.

- **For full transparency!** We demand daily reporting to the community on positive COVID-19 cases within the schools and districts.

- **Income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children!** Educators are not oblivious to the needs of parents, as the corporate-controlled politicians are. That is why the money handed over to the rich must be used to provide full income to those who cannot work because they must stay home with their children. At the same time, we call for a permanent moratorium to stop all evictions and home foreclosures.

- **No loss of income or benefits for educators who choose to stay home!** Education workers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions or subject their family members to possible transmission must be provided with full income and benefits for the pandemic’s duration, not fined or penalized in any way.

- **For the immediate retrofitting of all classrooms and school buildings to ensure they have modern, high-quality ventilation systems and air purifiers!** The costs associated with this must be borne by the financial oligarchy, not the working class.

- **No to liability waivers!** No student or employee should be forced to give up their rights in order to get an education or return to work.

- **No loss of income or benefits for students pursuing higher education!** Student loan debt must be abolished, and students must be given full and immediate refunds for tuition and room and board costs incurred during the pandemic. All international students and others in need or wishing to remain as residents of their postsecondary institutions during the period of remote instruction must be provided with free housing and meals. There can be no cuts to scholarships, and visa rights for all international students must be guaranteed at all levels.

- **Stop the criminalization of young people!** It is the “herd immunity” policy of the Trump administration implemented by Democrats and Republicans across the US that has allowed the pandemic to rage. The grotesque drive for corporate profits, not inappropriate behaviors from students, has led to the spread of the virus in colleges and throughout the

US. Face-to-face instruction must be ended, and students must not be punished, fined, or suspended for alleged social distancing violations, protests or strikes.

- **For rank-and-file control over school reopenings!** All decisions regarding the viability of reopening schools for in-person learning must be determined democratically by rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students, based on the independent assessment of trusted scientists and health experts.

- **For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers!** All those who speak out against unsafe working or learning conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against any victimization by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay. No retaliation against protesters or strikers.

- **Halt all nonessential production!** Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care, and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

To achieve these goals, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee advances three basic principles:

1. This committee is independent from the unions, including the AFT-P, the PSEA, APSCUF, AFSCME and the Teamsters. Educators can only organize and fight based on their own organization, democratically accountable to the rank-and-file.

2. We are independent of the Democrats and Republicans. The election of Joseph Biden will not resolve the crisis of the pandemic but will be used to deepen the attacks against workers and educators.

3. There is enough wealth to solve this problem. While Democrats and Republicans lie and claim there is no money to provide for education, health care, unemployment benefits, the wealth of the rich has been skyrocketing. The CARES Act transferred more than \$3 trillion to the wealthy, with the world’s billionaires now possessing over \$10.2 trillion. The wealth created by the working people must be democratically controlled and used by the working class in the best interest of society.

We urge all those opposed to the deadly reopening of schools to contact us today to get involved, and help build the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as widely as possible to prepare for the coming struggles.



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[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)