

350,000 US education jobs slashed in September

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11 October 2020

K-12 schools and colleges across the United States have issued yet another round of mass layoffs stemming from the economic fallout of the pandemic, with at least 350,000 education jobs slashed in September alone. According to the latest jobs report from the Department of Labor, employment in local government education fell by 231,000 and state government education by 49,000, while employment in private education decreased by 69,000.

The September layoffs come four months after an unprecedented 1.4 million layoffs to education workers throughout the country as a result of the pandemic. As was the case in April and May, the layoffs have affected in most part classified employees such as bus drivers, food service workers, campus assistants, paraeducators and other school employees. These school staff have been added to the growing mass of tens of millions facing evictions, hunger and destitution.

These mass layoffs take place as deadly school reopenings are pushed by federal and state governments across the US, in order to get students back into the classrooms to force their parents back into workplaces. Over 30 school employees and students have already died since schools began to reopen en masse in late July, while at least 42,778 students and educators have been infected and the health and lives of millions of people have been placed at risk.

School districts across the nation are facing financial disaster and ruin. Researchers at the Learning Policy Institute have estimated the pandemic's financial costs to public schools to be between \$199 billion and \$246 billion, which includes both the increased costs of dealing with COVID-19 and the loss of state revenue.

Furthermore, there have been record declines in enrollment throughout the country. Though there is not yet comprehensive national data on enrollment declines, a recent report from NPR shows there have been major reductions in dozens of school districts across at least 20 states. Of note, Los Angeles Unified School District in California, the second largest district in the country, has reported a drop in enrollment by 11,000 in students, while Miami-Dade County Public School District in Florida has lost at least 8,000 students, primarily from pre-K and kindergarten students.

Student enrollment is directly tied to the amount of state funding allocated for school districts, and such massive declines in enrollment throughout the US will be used to justify further austerity.

New York faces a \$16 billion budget shortfall and the deficit is expected to grow to \$66 billion over the next four years. According to a report by the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), school budget cuts combined with increased costs would leave nearly four in 10 school districts in the state either financially insolvent or unable to provide a sound, basic education to their students.

New York City alone faces a \$9 billion debt for the next two years, and Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio has already instituted mass furloughs and threatened layoffs of 22,000 workers if the city is denied funds from the state. On Thursday, city officials announced they will not be paying teachers \$900 million in retroactive pay due to budget cuts.

Various financial maneuvers and stop gap measures such as hiring freezes, cuts to programs, and school funding deferrals have allowed many districts to stave off greater budget cuts and layoffs, but only in the short term. September's mass job terminations are but a foreshadow of the looming economic disaster many districts face in the coming months. In many districts there are politicians promoting illusions that federal aid will stave off cuts, but in reality the entire political establishment is determined to destroy public education by starving districts and states of funds. The transition to remote learning, while necessary for public health, will be used by capitalist politicians to justify further budget cuts and mass layoffs.

The mass layoffs in education have largely gone unreported in the mainstream media, while the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates have done nothing to expose their extensiveness or carry out any struggle in defense of workers' jobs. A snapshot of some of the recent layoffs include:

- In **New York**, Schenectady City School District laid off over 100 teachers, social workers and school counselors and over 200 paraprofessionals on September 15 to cover \$22 million of a \$28.5 million budget deficit. Albany City School District eliminated nearly 220 full-time positions and restructured two specialized schools to cover \$16 million of a projected \$26 million deficit. Another 220 layoffs were announced at the end of September in Rochester City School District. The layoffs, which include cafeteria workers, custodial staff, and campus assistants, will be effective October 16.

- In **California**, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest district in the country, has seen nearly 520 job

terminations and 265 resignations since August, which includes both school employees and teachers. The Los Alamitos Unified School District eliminated 15 positions last month. Originally planning to lay off 292 workers in the district, the board withdrew its intention after plans were made to reopen elementary and middle schools in the district to in-person instruction. The decision came after teachers were on the brink of strike action and the union backed down from opposition, helping to push through a plan to reopen schools.

- In **Florida**, Broward County Public School District is offering pay raises to teachers who agree to teach in-person, while teachers who don't return must apply for a leave of absence, which in most cases will likely be unpaid.

- In Frederick County, **Virginia**, nearly 600 school bus drivers and food service workers in Frederick County Public School District were laid off, effective September 15.

- In **Maryland**, Baltimore City School District last month announced layoffs of over 450 temporary employees and imposed a hiring freeze as it tries to make up for a \$21 million budget shortfall. The layoffs will affect many full-time employees, including some teachers and teachers' assistants.

- In Dayton, **Ohio**, over 240 school employees at Dayton County Public Schools were temporarily laid off last month in order to save \$2.4 million over the course of nine weeks. Layoffs included teachers, nurses, counselors, administration, bus drivers and clerical staff. The layoffs have been met by protests from parents, teachers and other school staff.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act allocated only \$13.2 billion of the total \$2 trillion for K–12 public education, which accounted for less than 2 percent of total public education funding in the 2020–21 school year. This funding, which was stipulated to be used only for additional costs in dealing with the virus and not budget issues, has long since dried up.

Trump's Education Secretary Betsy DeVos recently stated at an online event, "We have continued to urge states and districts to make sure they're offering [in-person learning] as an option to families. Of course, these are state and local decisions, but we will continue to use the bully pulpit to urge this to happen."

In July, Trump offered to include \$105 billion in a future stimulus package, under the stipulation that if a given local district did not reopen, the money would be withheld, to "follow the child." These are code words for transferring public funds to private, religious or privately-managed charter schools, with Trump seeking to blackmail schools into reopening with in-person instruction.

A Special Education teacher in Hawaii with a PhD in Education, who has been teaching in Hawaii Public School District for over 20 years, spoke on the conditions in her state. She has been on medical leave since classes began in August and recently put in for leave without pay through December due to the uncertainty of schools reopening.

She declared, "I'm done fighting this. Special Education teachers here are not getting approved to telework. I have not gotten unemployment and my school would rather have an unlicensed teacher as a sub for my kids coming face-to-face than

work something out with me for distance learning. It's beyond shameful what's happening here."

Sylvia, a preschool teacher in Queen Creek Arizona with 12 years, is one of a handful of teachers in her district who face retaliation after voicing safety concerns and taking leave at the beginning of the school year. She took two weeks' leave and was threatened with her position being reassigned just prior to returning to work. Her current position was given to the teaching aide, and her application for FMLA has been denied by the district, which is instead offering only 35 continuous days of leave with no pay.

Sylvia commented, "They are keeping the teaching aide in that position and told my students' parents that they would be changing the teacher requirements for preschool teachers. I'm not feeling well because my rheumatoid arthritis is really out of control due to the stress.

"Right now I am out until December. The stress has taken a huge toll on both my mental and physical well-being. I absolutely need a job and can't afford to be out without pay, and they know this. I am not sure what to do. I shouldn't be working but I can't afford not to. It feels as if they are going above and beyond to keep me out of my classroom, and it definitely feels like I am being punished for taking leave. I am just so disheartened."

The struggle against deadly school reopenings and the threat it places on millions of lives is inextricably bound up with the fight for jobs and high quality public education. Under the current structures, neither state or local officials, nor the trade unions are offering any protections for jobs or workers' lives. This is why workers must form their own organizations, independent of the unions, to fight back.

There has been growing opposition to school reopenings by educators, parents and students across the US and internationally. Its most conscious expression has been in the building of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which have already been established in New York City, Detroit, Los Angeles, Florida, Texas, and Pennsylvania, with more currently being developed across the US.

This network of safety committees has been meeting regularly through national online meetings to unite and organize education workers and prepare for a nationwide general strike to close schools, provide high quality online education, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to contact us today to get involved.



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