

San Diego educators launch rank-and-file safety committee to halt school reopenings and save lives

San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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The San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been established in direct opposition to the dangerous reopening of schools to in-person instruction throughout San Diego County in Southern California.

Our efforts are part of a growing network of safety committees built by rank-and-file teachers, schools workers, parents and students throughout the US and internationally. These committees answer directly to the interests of the working class, not to major corporations, Wall Street, or their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties. Nor do we answer to the teachers unions which have facilitated school reopenings, allowing tens of thousands of students and educators to become infected and dozens of educators to die in the past three months.

Unlike the union bureaucracies, our rank-and-file safety committees are genuinely democratic organizations that serve to unite the working class to halt the spread of the pandemic and save lives.

The drive to reopen schools and colleges serves the interests of Wall Street and the financial elite, whose political and union lackeys promote the lie that schools can be reopened “safely.” In San Diego, as in New York City and other Democrat-led cities and states, the implementation of the phased-in “hybrid model” is a political ploy being used to begin the transition to fully in-person learning. However, the majority of teachers, students, and staff know full well that there can be no guarantee of safety with any in-person teaching, and hybrid models fundamentally accept the same risk of exposure, infection, and death as fully in-person learning.

In allowing for schools to reopen to in-person instruction, California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom is signing on to Trump’s homicidal herd immunity strategy which will result in a terrible escalation of disease and death. The local, state, and national teachers’ unions have signed on to this strategy. Since the entire political establishment is united in pursuing this criminal policy, teachers must organize and mobilize independently.

As educators, students, and working class community members committed to preventing the further loss of any life, we forcefully reject the policy of “herd immunity” peddled by politicians and district officials alike which endangers the working class.

To write off the death of even one student or school employee as an “acceptable casualty” or “inevitable loss” is reprehensible. **We insist: The life of each and every student and school employee is invaluable and non-negotiable!** California is approaching 785,000 COVID-19 cases, with a death toll nearing 15,000 as cases and deaths continue to rise throughout the state. Despite these staggering figures, Governor Newsom’s reopening plan allows any county with a test positivity rate below 8 percent or a daily case positivity rate of 7 per 100,000 over a 21-day period to reopen schools for in-person instruction.

In those counties with a positivity rate higher than 8 percent, schools can

still apply for waivers to reopen to in-person instruction. Hundreds of schools throughout the state, particularly elementary schools, have already received these waivers to reopen. San Diego County has reported 50,614 cases and 826 deaths and a current positivity rate of 3.5 percent, and has been able to reopen schools and businesses since September 1.

The challenges posed by the pandemic in education can only be met by devoting the necessary resources to it. While workers are routinely told that there is no money for education or any necessary social services, this is a blatant lie in California, the wealthiest state in the US and home to over 150 billionaires.

Social conditions were already dire prior to the pandemic. One in three K-12 students in California faced food and housing insecurity as the state has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. A 2018 study by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that over 50 percent of community college students have experienced housing and/or food insecurity, figures which have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the economic fallout from the pandemic.

Having already been starved of state and federal funding for education for decades, schools in California face unprecedented budget deficits in the coming years as a result of the economic crisis produced by the pandemic. Tens of thousands of teachers and school employees have been laid off since March, with hundreds of thousands more educators’ jobs threatened by looming budget cuts.

More than 400 San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) employees were laid off in April alone due to compounded economic issues, and over 200 teachers, librarians, and counselors in Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) were laid off in March due to a more than \$30 million budget deficit prior to the pandemic.

Facing opposition from teachers and students throughout the county and amid rising positive cases in the region, the three largest school districts in San Diego County were forced to begin the school year under a virtual model, in an attempt to bide time for plans to reopen in-person instruction. These districts—San Diego Unified School District, Sweetwater Union High School District, and Poway Unified School District—plan to finalize a date for in-person reopening plans under a phased in, hybrid model for their student populations by the end of November.

San Diego Unified School District, the largest district in the county and second largest in California, has already begun implementing phase one of their reopening plan by offering voluntary one-on-one as well as small group in-person instruction to the district’s 60,000 TK-5th grade students, as well as in-person sessions to its 12,000 students with special needs.

Other public school districts, such as Cajon Valley and Lakeside Unified, will be offering in-person and online options for their entire student population starting this month. Dozens of private schools in the county have already begun fully in-person instruction.

At University of California San Diego (UCSD), the campus will hold 12 percent of their classes in-person, and allow more than 7,500 students into the on-campus dormitories at the end of September. The Fall quarter has yet to begin but already the university has announced that at least 47 students, 21 staff and 184 health care workers have so far tested positive for COVID-19.

Nearby San Diego State University (SDSU) has made national headlines for their skyrocketing cases as a result of in-person classes and on-campus housing. As of September 20, over 851 students have tested positive for the virus, with roughly 200 more positive tests each week.

Motivated by science and the interests of teachers, students, and their communities, we issue the following immediate demands:

- **An immediate halt to all in-person and hybrid instruction for K-12 schools and colleges in San Diego County until the virus is contained!** This is non-negotiable. It is not possible to reopen safely at this time.

- **Full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction so that schools can remain online!** Students and teachers have been left with inadequate training and preparation for online learning, no doubt compromising the educational and teaching experience. Large portions of the trillions of dollars handed to the rich by Congress through the CARES Act must be redistributed to provide educators and learners the means and technology necessary to carry out fully remote instruction, including high-quality computer hardware and software, and utilities free of charge. Families must be provided with high quality food, mental health care, special education supports and all other resources needed to provide the best remote learning environment for every student and educator.

- **Full income protection for all educators who choose to teach from home!** Teachers must be protected from losing their positions at their school if they decide to remain virtual. Additionally, teachers must be provided unlimited sick leave to avoid the macabre outcome of rationing sick days based on severity of symptoms. We reject the blackmailing of teachers who are threatened with losing their credentials should they break contracts to protect themselves by refusing to enter schools.

- **Full income, housing protection and medical care for parents who elect to stay home to facilitate their children's education!** The well-being of children is not limited to ending the immediate threat of the virus, but also having a stable home life and access to nutrition. Parents must be liberated to focus on the issues and concerns that arise with their children's education, without the threat of economic ruin. Teachers, school workers, and parents have the same interests. Unlike the politicians, educators are genuinely concerned about the loss of income that parents would have if they stay home in order to ensure the safety of their child.

- **Full support to whistle-blowers who draw attention to the problems at hand for all school employees, students, parents and the public!** We reject the cover-up of COVID-19 cases where schools have reopened. Teachers and students have been retaliated against and censored by administrators across the US for revealing dangerous policies and outbreaks, but all information regarding cases and the spread of the virus must be shared. Any efforts by administrators or government officials to conceal the details about the spread of the infection must be opposed and the truth revealed to the public.

- **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 and their own safety committees to enforce safe conditions. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full salary and access to free health care, including regular COVID-19 testing.

- **For the immediate freezing of college tuition, abolition of student loan debt, and the provision of free housing and meals to all students during the period of remote instruction!** Universities are opening up across the nation with massive spikes, forcing thousands of students to isolate in dormitories in prison-like conditions. This must be stopped.

- **For the full protection of all immigrant students, workers and their children, including full income support while they are unable to work in unsafe workplaces!** A large number of students in San Diego County cross the border daily to attend school in the US. Thousands of families straddle the border, with millions more in families comprised of members with mixed immigration status. We demand a halt to all imprisonment and deportation by the federal authorities and the abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement and its brutal and criminal operations. We call for a united struggle of workers and students in the US and Mexico.

- **The reopening of schools for in-person learning shall only be determined democratically by rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students, based on an independent assessment of trusted scientists and health experts.** We will not accept the current deadly working conditions imposed upon us. Our demands are based on science and the interests of the vast majority of the population, and they are not negotiable.

- **Should rank and file safety committees decide for schools to reopen face-to-face, we demand safety measures, preparation, and sanitation of facilities be enacted at the highest scientific level.** Universal daily rapid on-site testing of all faculty, students and staff must be made mandatory. School ventilation systems must be renovated or replaced to comply with scientific recommendations for a safe environment. Registered nurses must be stationed at every school, and authorized and trained to oversee testing and robust contact tracing. Working alongside educators organized in the rank-and-file safety committee, they must ensure that safety protocols are fully enacted. Teachers have the collective right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.

Each of these demands must be fully paid for by the corporate and financial oligarchy that controls the entire political system in California, among the most unequal states in the US. During the first three months of the pandemic, the state's 154 billionaires, including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, collectively amassed \$174.4 billion, almost as much as the entire \$202.1 billion state budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year.

San Diego is also a center of the military-industrial complex and the principal home port of the US Navy's Pacific Fleet. The cost of a single aircraft carrier is \$13 billion and the total costs of the developing Nimitz class of carriers was \$37.3 billion, enough to hire 462,000 teachers each earning an \$80,000 annual salary. We reject the lie that there is no money to fund high quality remote education and services to all students amid the

pandemic!

All workers and youth have the same interests in defending their lives and their right to high quality public education. Education, from preschool to university levels, involves teachers, substitute teachers, specialists, nurses, office staff, counselors, administrators, bus drivers, special education support staff, cafeteria workers, custodians, electricians, construction workers, psychologists, and volunteers working together with parents and students.

The national, state, and local teachers' unions tell educators that all they can do is appeal to the conscience of the powers that be, even though their economic interests are diametrically opposed to the interests of teachers, school workers and parents. From the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) to the local San Diego Education Association (SDEA) and Sweetwater Education Association (SEA), they continue to appeal to congress to pass the fraudulent HEROES Act, while pushing open the doors to the most vulnerable students in order to set a precedent towards full reopening.

Our committee bases itself on science. We warn that the current reopening plans are extremely dangerous and will lead to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout the population. We call on all students, educators, and workers to organize independently and democratically. Join the San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and take up the fight to prepare for a general strike of the entire working class to halt the reopening of schools, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.



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