

As outbreaks spread in US, major Democrat-led cities push to reopen schools

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With 41 US states experiencing rising COVID-19 infections, including 10 that have seen their highest numbers since the pandemic began, Democratic state and local officials in major urban school districts—including Boston, Houston, Washington DC, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Diego—are pressing ahead with plans to resume in-person learning in the coming weeks.

While Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and other party officials publicly decry President Trump's blatant indifference to the spread of the virus, in practice the Democrats are carrying out the same murderous policy of opening schools amid the raging pandemic. The Democrats and Republicans represent different factions of the same capitalist class, which will brook no letup in its drive to accumulate profit. Forcing children back into classrooms is a critical component of herding their parents back into factories and other workplaces.

Although there is no federal monitoring of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools, and many states and school districts simply do not report infections, the opening of K-12 schools, colleges and universities has already greatly contributed to the resurgence of the pandemic in the US and internationally. According to the COVID Monitor, there have been at least 67,422 cases among students and staff at K-12 schools across the US. At least 44 teachers, aides, school bus drivers and other school employees have died since July 25.

Facing popular opposition in large urban areas, Democratic Party officials in several major school districts initially delayed in-person learning, starting their school year online. In recent weeks, New York City became the first major Democratic-led school district to transition to in-person learning. So-called progressive Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio aimed to set a precedent in the largest school district in the nation and the center of Wall Street, which is now being followed by Democrats across the country.

Educators, parents and students who oppose the reckless reopening of schools have now entered a new stage in the battle to protect their lives and those of the members of their communities.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) have done everything in their power to prevent a unified struggle among educators to stop the reopening of schools, while seeking to channel the enormous opposition of educators behind the Biden campaign and the Democratic Party.

The only organization fighting to unify rank-and-file educators across district and state lines, and asserting the rights to safety and

high quality online instruction, is the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed in mid-August and is now a network of eight state and local committees across the country.

In its founding statement, the committee warned, "The AFT and NEA are collaborating with the Democratic Party to perpetuate the lie that schools can be reopened safely. In cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and in other major urban areas, the unions have reached deals with local Democrats to start the semester with online learning only. But this is only a maneuver to dissipate popular opposition and give them more time to prepare a full reopening."

This warning has been fully confirmed, and the necessary conclusions must be drawn. We urge all those who are serious about shutting down schools and saving lives to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and help build a local or statewide committee in your region.

On Monday, **Houston** public schools resumed face-to-face classes for more than 80,000 students, roughly 40 percent of the district's total. Texas has been an epicenter of the pandemic in the US, with the second highest numbers of cases and deaths at 875,767 and 17,597, respectively, engendering enormous opposition to school openings throughout the state. Houston-area teachers held a car caravan protest outside the district headquarters over the weekend, while similar protests have been held in numerous other Texas cities since July.

After a citywide infection rate of 4.4 percent forced **Boston** authorities to delay plans to resume in-person instruction by one week, administrators announced that "high-needs" students, who have been attending two days of classes per week since October 1, will begin a four-day schedule this Thursday. This will be followed by pre-kindergarten to third grade classes on October 29 and other grades spread out over the first two weeks of November.

In **Washington, DC**, Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser announced last week that the unions and the city had achieved a "large agreement on how to reopen" schools by early November. Facing rank-and-file opposition, the Washington Teachers' Union is holding out for a deal that will include some additional cosmetic safety protocols, such as including union officials in school safety checks. The proposed agreement praised by Mayor Bowser does not stipulate that in-person teaching will be optional, thus compelling large numbers of vulnerable teachers to either risk their lives by returning to work or be driven into an early retirement.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials announced Friday that 20,000 pre-K and special needs students would be brought back

for in-person instruction sometime in the second quarter, which starts November 6, with other grades starting in January. CPS CEO Janice Jackson complained about falling enrollment and said early learners and special needs students were “not being served well enough online,” but said nothing about the district’s poorly resourced and chaotically implemented remote learning program.

In a press conference Monday, Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot acknowledged that the pandemic is spreading rapidly throughout the city, with the seven-day positivity rate surpassing five percent for the first time in months and rates approaching 20 percent in some city zip codes. Nevertheless, she reiterated her plans to reopen schools, based on the dubious claim, “We are not seeing the schools as a source of spread.”

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has done nothing but issue verbal protests about the district’s “dangerous strategy” while making it clear it is willing to work with Lightfoot and school officials on a joint plan to reopen.

Los Angeles Unified School District and **San Diego** Unified School District, the two largest districts in California, are both pressing ahead with reopening schools for in-person learning. In Chula Vista Elementary School District, the second largest in San Diego County, mounting opposition among educators has forced the district to postpone reopening plans until at least the new year.

In justifying the reopening of schools across the country—which the majority of parents and educators recognize as lunacy—Democratic officials are advancing two spurious claims. First, they assert that where schools have reopened, such as in New York City, outbreaks have been limited so far. Second, they feign sympathy for students struggling with remote learning, while covering up their deliberate sabotage of this safe alternative to in-person instruction.

In an article published Monday, the *New York Times* suggested that New York City’s reopening of schools “could serve as an influential model for the nation,” due to the low infection rates found by the district’s testing program. However, only 10-20 percent of the students and teachers in school are being randomly tested, and that is taking place just once a month. Further, only 72,000 students out of the 500,000 who are attending in-person classes have gotten parental approval for testing, thus skewing the results of the testing program to a small subset of those potentially infected.

The accelerating spread of COVID-19 throughout Europe, where schools recently reopened en masse, is a warning sign for the US. Roughly a third of all recent coronavirus outbreaks in the UK and France have occurred in schools, which have also been shown to be vectors for the spread of the virus in Spain and Italy.

The supposed concern of Democrats for the educational setbacks from online learning is deeply cynical. These are the same politicians that have collaborated with Republicans to defund public education for decades. Under Obama, hundreds of thousands of teachers lost their jobs permanently, while education funding in most states never returned to pre-2008 levels. At present, both parties are starving education of funding, with states facing a combined budget deficit of roughly \$300 billion and hundreds of thousands of educators losing their jobs.

The Democrats are collaborating with the Republicans to place

enormous economic pressures on parents to return to work, with the aim of driving a wedge between educators and parents. But there is widespread recognition of the dangers posed to the entire working class, and the push to reopen the largest districts in the US will encounter enormous opposition.

Last Thursday, 652 teachers in the West Ada School District in Idaho staged a sickout strike in defiance of the local school board’s decision to continue conducting classes in a hybrid model while the spread of the pandemic deepens in the region. A similar sickout of 168 educators took place last week in Montgomery, Alabama, where in-person learning resumed across the district. These follow protests and strikes that have taken place on a near-weekly basis since August.

Kathy, a school bus driver from Eastern Pennsylvania and member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, commented on the role of both parties, saying, “The Republicans are more fascist, but the Democrats don’t stand up to them. They act like they are trying but they are not. This is costing our lives. It is happening now. I believe that schools are vectors, the economists are trying to play it down, but they just want people back to work.” She added, “The unions aren’t fighting for us. I haven’t heard a peep from them. What are we paying them for?”

The critical task facing educators and all those fighting for safe conditions is to break with the Democratic Party and their backers in the teachers unions and pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, all of which support the drive to reopen schools and the broader economy.

Only through the expansion of the network of rank-and-file safety committees among educators, parents, students and the entire working class can the massive opposition to the homicidal policies of the ruling class find a way forward. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to contact us today.



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