

As teachers fight deadly return to school, the DSA runs to the defense of the unions and Democrats

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Educators in the US face a new stage in the battle against unsafe school openings as officials in Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles and other major Democratic-led cities press ahead with plans to resume in-person instruction in November. The coming weeks, which coincide with the most explosive presidential elections since the Civil War, will increasingly pit educators not only against Trump's homicidal "herd immunity" policy, but also Biden and the Democrats, who are pressing to reopen schools even as epidemiologists warn that the US is entering the "darkest period of the pandemic."

Tens of thousands of infections have already spread through public schools, and at least 44 teachers, aides and other school employees have died. Far from opposing this, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates have proven incapable of protecting educators. Despite all the lawsuits, empty threats of "safety strikes" and other impotent protests, the schools are reopening, imperiling the lives of educators, students and the broader community.

Because of this, an increasing number of teachers and other educators have taken up the call advanced by the Socialist Equality Party for the building of educator rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party. A network of rank-and-file safety committees has already been formed consisting of local committees in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, Pennsylvania, Texas and other locations to mobilize educators and broader sections of the working class against the unsafe school openings and the bipartisan program of budget cuts and layoffs.

A number of teachers who have begun to take up this fight have asked about the role of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose supporters have leading positions in various union factions, including the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE), Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) and Union Power in New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles respectively.

What is common to all of these factions is their claim that the unions can be transformed into fighting instruments for teachers if only the rank and file apply enough pressure on the union bureaucracy. By pressuring the unions, the DSA claims, the unions will, in turn, pressure the Democrats to change their stripes and abandon their reckless endangerment of teachers and austerity measures on behalf of Wall Street.

This is nonsense. Bitter experiences over the last four decades have shown that the unions cannot be reformed. The various experiments to do so—from the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and New Directions in the UAW in the 1970s and 1980s, to the takeover of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) more recently—have produced nothing but disaster for workers and cozy positions at the top of the unions for the so-called reformers.

As for the Democrats, they long ago abandoned any association with social reforms of the past and have sought to outdo the Republicans in their defense of the financial oligarchy and American imperialism. This has culminated in the selection of Joe Biden, a lifelong shill of corporate America.

The DSA, despite its occasional references to "socialism," is hostile to the interests of the working class and the struggle by the Socialist Equality Party for the political independence of the working class and the development of socialist consciousness. Instead, the DSA represents the aspirations of a layer of the upper-middle class, which promotes the unions and identity politics to disorient workers and young people, while striving to obtain positions in the union apparatus and within the capitalist state like its pseudo-left counterparts Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

This is made clear in an article by Eric Blanc, titled "The Teachers' 'Red for Ed' movement is far from dead," published on the website of the DSA-aligned *Jacobin Magazine* on October 13. Blanc, formerly a leading member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), is one of the DSA-aligned magazine's main contributors on the trade unions. He is also the author of a 2019 book, *Red State Revolt*, which seeks to cover up the destructive role of the DSA during the wave of wildcat teacher strikes in 2018, which started in West Virginia.

Blanc begins his article by claiming the 2018 strikes were the beginning of a string of great victories that herald a "long-awaited revival of organized labor." The *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed these claims in its review of *Red State Revolt*. These strikes were, in fact, a revolt against the AFT and NEA, which had the potential to develop into a nationwide strike against the decades-long bipartisan assault on public education. Due to the efforts of the DSA and other pseudo-left movements, however, this incipient movement was channeled back into the hands of the unions, which strangled it.

Rather than forcing the unions to fight through mass pressure, as Blanc asserts, the unions worked overtime to isolate each struggle, subordinate them to the Democratic Party and end the strikes on terms that betrayed the teachers' main demands to restore more than a decade of school funding cuts and significantly improve their classroom conditions and living standards.

In the two years since the 2018 strike wave, the unions have not yielded an inch to the opposition of teachers. In fact, they have doubled down and fought more openly against the teachers. Nowhere is this more evident than in the role the AFT, NEA and their state and local affiliates have played in forcing the reopening of schools in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

This includes local unions where the DSA or other pseudo-left groups

are in the leadership. The Chicago Teachers Union, led by former ISO member Jesse Sharkey, is demanding only that mayor Lori Lightfoot “develop a plan” for reopening. The United Teachers of Los Angeles, which is led by the DSA-backed Union Power caucus, has only “expressed concern” about reopening while working to prevent the outbreak of strikes.

To cover this up, Blanc is compelled to magnify his lies about 2018 by claiming that the unions since then have “generally become more assertive.” In reality, the agreements signed by the CTU and the UTLA with Democratic mayors, which started school years with remote-only instruction, were used to prevent a revolt by teachers and parents and prepare conditions for the full reopenings that are now occurring. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers, with the aid of the MORE faction, agreed to the opening of the nation’s largest school system last month.

At one point, Blanc feels compelled to add that “tensions” still exist “between risk-averse officials and more combative activists oriented to workplace militancy and social justice issues.” In effect, Blanc is urging union executives to use the DSA’s services and its “social justice” rhetoric before teachers abandon the unions in droves and seek out a far more radical, i.e., anti-capitalist and socialist, alternative.

Blanc devotes a whole section in his essay to how calling periodic strikes can be financially beneficial to the union bureaucracy. “The available evidence suggests that union membership grew in the wake of successful union-led strikes,” he says, while “*ineffectual strikes, in contrast, led to a decrease in dues-payers* [emphasis added].” For Blanc, however, a “successful strike” is not one in which teachers actually win anything, but one that leads to more dues money and positions for DSA types.

He brags that in Los Angeles, “An increase in membership dues and internal staffing served as the scaffolding for training hundreds of rank-and-file leaders,” preparing the ground for a district-wide strike in 2019. In fact, the UTLA forced through a sellout of last year’s strike before teachers even had sufficient time to study the new agreement.

Blanc also holds up the 2012 Chicago teachers strike as “the most important precursor to, and inspiration for,” the 2018 strikes. But in fact, the CTU forced through a sellout in 2012 that paved the way for dozens of school closures.

On the coronavirus pandemic, which is the primary driver of opposition and anger among teachers, Blanc has nothing to say. He relegates the whole issue, as though it were a distant shape on the horizon, to a few brief paragraphs at the end of the article. “Teachers and students throughout the country continue to be exposed to unsafe and unhealthy working and learning conditions, particularly those whose unions did not lead a strong pushback to their districts’ reopening plans,” Blanc blandly states. He politely declines to point out that none of the unions have led a “strong pushback” to reopening, nor does he suggest to teachers how an organization willing to sacrifice the lives of workers in the interest of the ruling class could possibly be called a workers’ organization.

In the course of his brief comments, Blanc also accepts uncritically the decision in March by the teachers union in St. Paul, Minnesota to end a strike on the absurd pretext that the strike, and not the continuation of classes, was endangering public health. Blanc also leaves out entirely the role of the Michigan AFT in isolating and crushing the nine-day strike by 1,200 University of Michigan graduate student workers last month, which was centered on the fight against unsafe teaching conditions during the contagion.

In ignoring the pandemic, Blanc is not merely covering for the unions, but for the DSA itself. *Jacobin* published an article earlier this month that publicly endorsed “herd immunity” as a supposedly progressive policy. The article was an interview with two academics, one of whom has gone on to visit the Trump White House and sign the infamous Great

Barrington Declaration. In other words, Blanc and his colleagues at *Jacobin* and the DSA, whatever their rhetoric, are aligned with the same forces pushing for the deadly school reopenings.

Blanc also encourages teachers to support Democratic candidates in general and the Biden campaign in particular. In a statement which reeks with hypocrisy, he claims: “Though Biden presided over years of austerity, privatization, and high-stakes testing as part of the Obama administration, it is a testament to the strength of Red for Ed and the changing political tides that Biden’s campaign has, at least rhetorically, significantly distanced itself from those anti-educator policies.” Here, Blanc is unable to produce even one example of a “rhetorical” concession by Biden.

He concludes: “Whether Biden will stick to his campaign promises if elected will very likely depend on the extent to which the movement can pressure him through strikes, protests, and community organizing.” In other words, Blanc preemptively shifts the blame for Biden’s policies from his shoulders to those of teachers themselves for insufficiently “pressuring” this reactionary politician.

In reality, the Democrats are yielding to pressure, not from workers, but from the extreme right. They are deliberately downplaying the threat of a coup d’état by Donald Trump even as he makes clear that he will not respect the outcome of the election. They have largely dropped any mention of the fascist conspiracy to kidnap and murder Gretchen Whitmer, the Democratic governor of Michigan, and have ignored growing evidence pointing to the links from the plotters to figures within the Republican leadership. Finally, they rapidly abandoned any opposition to the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, which will grant Trump a 6-3 majority in the event that he attempts to challenge the election results in the courts.

But even if Biden were to become president, no amount of popular “pressure” can change the fact that the profits demanded by Wall Street are incompatible with the basic social needs of the working class. A Biden administration, pledged by Blanc’s own admission to right-wing corporate policies, would be no less ruthless in its assault on teachers than the Trump administration. And if Trump attempts to remain in office despite losing the election, the Democrats’ own continual retreats show that they, as a capitalist party, fear the mobilization of the working class more than they do even fascist dictatorship in America.

Regardless of the outcome of the elections, educators in the US, like their counterparts around the world, are entering a new period of immense class battles, along with the entire working class. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace and factory committees, independent of the corrupt unions, are needed. At the same time, all the struggles of workers—against austerity, social inequality, police killings, the danger of fascism and war—have to be united in a political struggle against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of economic, political and social life. We urge educators to contact us today to take up this fight.



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