

Over 100 teachers launch wildcat sickout strike in Houston

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23 October 2020

In a demonstration of the immense opposition among educators to the deadly reopening of schools, over 100 teachers from at least 39 schools in Houston Independent School District (HISD) carried out a wildcat sickout strike Thursday in defiance of reactionary state laws that prohibit striking in Texas.

The sickout was organized by a group calling itself “Educators for a Safe Reopening,” which has issued fairly limited demands on the district, including the enforcement of social distancing, providing an “optimized HVAC system” in every classroom, and transparency on COVID-19 infections at schools, among others.

As part of a nationwide push by Democrat-led school districts to reopen schools while the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating throughout the county, Houston schools reopened Monday, sending roughly 80,000 children back into classrooms in the seventh-largest school district in the US. Houston is the largest city in Texas, located in Harris County, which has been the worst-hit county in the state. On Wednesday, Texas saw the highest numbers of new COVID-19 cases (6,197) and deaths (92), surpassing California as the state with the highest total number of cases at 896,241.

Since the beginning of August, at least 9,719 students and 6,454 staff across Texas have contracted COVID-19, according to the state’s Department of Health and Human Services. This does not include private schools, and the district-by-district breakdown does not contain information for districts with fewer than fifty students enrolled in-person. At least seven educators across Texas have died of the virus since August 1, according to *Education Week*.

At a press conference Monday at Highland Heights Elementary, HISD Interim Superintendent Grenita Lathan boasted of a supposed smooth reopening of schools, thanking Mayor Sylvester Turner, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, County Commissioner Rodley Ellis, State Senator John Whitmyer and state Representative Jaris Johnson, all Democrats, for being “strong advocates for HISD” and putting “children at the forefront.”

The drive by Texas Democrats to reopen schools coincides with growing calls by the Biden-Harris campaign for the full reopening of schools, under the fraudulent claim that this can

be done “safely” while the pandemic spirals out of control.

At Thursday’s presidential debate, Joe Biden proclaimed that schools simply “need a lot of money to open,” adding, “they need to deal with ventilation systems, smaller classes, more teachers, more pods.”

These comments follow a tweet Wednesday from Kamala Harris, who wrote, “@JoeBiden and I want to get your kids back to school as quickly and safely as possible. This starts with masks and rapid testing, science-based safety guidelines, and emergency funding to ensure our schools have the resources they need to keep students and staff safe.”

At Monday’s press conference, Houston Superintendent Lathan proclaimed their mantra for reopening is “reconnect safely, return strong,” adding that after six weeks of online classes, “we are returning strong with safe in person instruction, we are safely welcoming students back to campus.” Within hours, officials announced the closure of 16 schools Tuesday due to at least 90 confirmed or presumed COVID-19 cases at K-12 schools. As of Thursday night, there are now 104 confirmed cases district-wide.

The Harris County COVID dashboard has increased the county’s rating from “Level 2 – Significant” to “Level 1 – Severe,” signifying “a severe and uncontrolled level of COVID-19 in Harris County, meaning outbreaks are present and worsening and that testing and contact tracing capacity is strained or exceeded.”

Teachers in Texas with medical conditions that would otherwise exempt them from teaching are now being forced to resume in-person instruction, with districts claiming that it would not be safe for students if vulnerable teachers were not sent back.

On Wednesday, HISD announced that they have increased the requirements for shutting down schools from one confirmed COVID-19 case to two confirmed cases. The district also changed its policy so that teachers and students would return to school the day after a breakout, with many schools that were closed Tuesday reopening on Wednesday after a supposed “deep cleaning.” The wildcat sickout strike was precipitated by this reckless loosening of safety protocols.

A teacher from HISD who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the sickout clarified that it was organized

independently of the teachers unions. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates have remained silent on the sickout, offering no public support whatsoever.

The striking teacher stated, “Our school shut down due to a case. We were in session for two days, and we had to shut down due to confirmed or unconfirmed cases. I think the idea that the pandemic is getting better is incorrect.”

Commenting on the broader social crisis during the pandemic, they said, “People have lost their jobs, their employment is dwindling or non-existent. People are being forced back to work. Parents are forced to send children back to school so that they can be making money. We understand a lot of that. We see that now is not the safest time to reopen.”

The teacher noted the totally unsafe protocols implemented by the school district, stating, “If you discover one case, there is not enough time to do a full investigation of who had contact with the infected student. Exposure isn’t about the one person you discovered. Sometimes it’s about a group you discovered, and they only seem to be focusing on the one case.”

He also described issues with social distancing in classrooms, with the distancing requirement set at three feet instead of the previously promised six feet, and many children eating together in poorly-ventilated classrooms during lunch.

The teacher also cited issues with getting medical leave for at-risk teachers, describing the district’s change from allowing teachers to opt for virtual instruction to limiting their time for medical leave, saying, “Most chose to stay virtual, then the district limited who can be virtual. I don’t think it should have been a competition, many have underlying problems, many have had cancer, diabetes, things they can be dealing with. Compounded with COVID-19, that can be a really terrible mix.”

The district has also implemented a more punitive policy of sanctions against teachers that decide to resign from their positions too late into the semester, threatening the revocation of their teachers’ licenses.

A teacher in Colorado, who voiced support for the Houston sickout strikers, told the WSWS, “Educators have been suddenly thrown into dangerous working conditions with inadequate preparation and into remote learning conditions from what were traditional learning environments.

“Many teachers are at the breaking point, fearful for their safety, their loved ones, and their students. They are also struggling to engage students effectively in a remote learning context that requires more self-regulation from students than traditional learning. Add onto these problems the dire budgetary cuts that schools have gone through and are currently facing, and you have a recipe for mass collective action on the part of ground level educators.”

The recently-formed Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is fighting to organize and unite educators, parents and students with the broader working class in order to

stop the spread of the pandemic, issued the following statement in support of Houston teachers:

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee fully supports the efforts of the teachers in Houston to refuse the homicidal back-to-work dictates of the Trump administration, the TEA, and the Democrat-led HISD administration seeking to claim the mantle of workers’ defense while leaving teachers to fend for themselves.

Workers, parents and students throughout Houston and across Texas must stand together against the anti-scientific mandates of the corporate elite and their lackeys in both major parties on Capitol Hill. Only the working class, mobilized independently of the Democrats and their trade union backers, is capable of sufficiently combating this sustained offensive against educators across the political spectrum. We stand with the workers of HISD in demanding a transition to exclusively online learning to protect the lives of our teachers, students, parents, families, and communities at large.

The initiative taken by Houston teachers is an expression of the immense opposition that is developing among educators and the entire working class. The critical task is to build genuine fighting organizations to unite and mobilize this opposition, which can only be done independently of both big business parties and the pro-capitalist teachers unions. We urge all those who wish to carry forward this struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today.



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