

“I would love to see a national strike.”

Houston teachers speak out on their wildcat sickout strike

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The one-day wildcat sickout strike launched by teachers in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) last Thursday had more participants than initially reported, with a conservative estimate putting the number who participated at 150-200, according to Houston teachers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. It has also been revealed that the strike was not limited to HISD, with teachers in at least two other districts taking part in the sickout.

The sickout was spread by word-of-mouth, and HISD has refused to release the number of sickout absences, no doubt concerned about sparking further strikes. HISD is the largest school district in the largest city in Texas, serving over 200,000 children. Houston ranks as the fourth largest city in the United States and is controlled by the Democratic Party, which alongside Trump and the Republicans is pursuing the same policy of reopening schools across the US.

At a press conference last week to initiate the reopening of Houston schools, five Democrats from the local, state and federal levels sanctioned the homicidal school reopenings, which coincide with a massive uptick of the COVID-19 pandemic across the country. At the presidential debate last week, Joe Biden made clear that he would implement the same policies as Trump of reopening schools and the broader economy, claiming this could be done “safely” with some additional funding.

The list of schools where sickouts took place last Thursday is extensive, encompassing at least 45 schools in three districts at all levels of education, according to reports from organizers. In Houston ISD, at least 41 schools had teachers participating, while teachers from two schools each in Aldine ISD and Cy Fair ISD took part in the sickout.

The reopening of Houston schools has relied on a

combination of economic pressure, blackmail, lies and dirty tricks directed against teachers and parents. Parents have faced the reduction and elimination of unemployment benefits, and most do not have the ability to work remotely. Parents and teachers have also been given misleading reports from HISD and the local media that downplay the threat of the pandemic in schools, with cheery proclamations of all the “safety” measures supposedly taken by the district, whose mantra for reopening is “Reconnect safely, return strong.”

In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers denounced the return to in-person instruction and spoke in favor of building independent rank-and-file safety committees to halt in-person instruction. Notably, teachers expressed support for socialism, representing a broader trend in the working class moving further to the left as the pandemic deepens.

Given the reactionary state laws that exist in Texas which prohibit striking, all teachers quoted in this article used pseudonyms to protect their privacy and prevent retaliation. We urge all educators in Houston and across Texas who wish to speak out on your conditions and organize the immense opposition to school reopenings to send us your contact information and join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Brenda, a Houston teacher who took part in the sickout, spoke in favor of shutting down in-person schooling and the call for a nationwide strike issued by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Brenda is also a member of the Houston Federation of Teachers, and criticized the silence and complicity of the teachers unions, who have said nothing publicly about the sickout.

Brenda commented, “I would love to see a national strike. Even with the demands I saw from local organizers of the sickout, I personally thought they should be further.

I think a lot of our union leadership have closed-door meetings with superintendents. I think a lot of this is dictated by politics.

“I’d like to see Texas and the country not have in-person schooling. We were literally forced to go back to work. If we didn’t go, we would be written up for failure to report. Even teachers with autoimmune diseases and cancer were forced to go back. I have heard administrators and the media say that we need to go back. I’m not a nurse, I’m not a doctor, I’m not a health care expert. We are not trained for this. There’s this idea that we are essential workers, but I am not trained for this.”

When asked whether she supports a nationwide strike, Brenda stated, “Yes. I know many people who said they would have joined our sickout if they knew about it, and many have said they would do it next time. I think that people are excited and that it can grow, especially if the students could get involved.

“Last week, right before this all happened the Houston Student Council came out with a statement saying they were against in-person instruction. I think this is one step in a much larger step in Texas and the world. I think getting teachers and students to talk, in each district and each state, to talk to each other, it would be difficult for teachers to turn away. Our demands were limited for HISD, but the demands you shared from the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee were a lot bigger, and it’s exciting to hear that a group has put forward demands like these.”

Brenda noted, “I generally agree a lot more with socialist ideals,” adding that she was “not really surprised” to hear about the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) swinging their support from Bernie Sanders to Joe Biden. She commented, “I’m more of the type of person that thinks we should just fight against it. I don’t agree with the DSA leadership’s decision to support Biden. It’s disheartening to hear that, it’s just a support of capitalism, and a lot of the issues we are facing are caused by capitalism.”

Commenting on the way forward for educators in Houston and more broadly, Brenda stated, “This is an opportunity, and I hope that what comes out of the sickout is a movement, that it is not an isolated incident. I hope this incites change in educators across the nation, and we have a big opportunity for change in the education system.”

Josh, a teacher in Aldine ISD who participated in the sickout, spoke in solidarity with the large number of Houston teachers that participated, saying, “I hope that

people are inspired to do more and continue with this effort. I denounce the reopening of schools and am fully in support of the action they took. I hope this becomes a regular thing. This action is absolutely necessary.”

Abigail, a long-time teacher in Mansfield ISD and a member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, stated, “Teachers, you are worth protecting. You are irreplaceable to your families and loved ones. Do not continue to prove to administrators or government that you are willing to work to accomplish impossible tasks and risk your health doing it. Stand strong and be encouraged.”

Brandon, another teacher in Houston who took part in the sickout, noted, “Even Walmart isn’t as closely crowded as a school. Walmart still has enough space as opposed to schools.” Brandon agreed that the science is clear that outbreaks will occur when people are sent back to face-to-face instruction.

When asked what he thought of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee’s demand for an end to in-person classes and for the decision to reopen schools to be made by rank-and-file educators on the basis of science, Brandon stated, “That is the most common-sense demand we can ask for. It would be perfect for the on-the-ground educators to decide, not somebody in an office, not an office in the state. We are the ones on the front line. They aren’t talking about hazard pay, they basically told us to just get back to work. We need both, we need our health and our career.”

Brandon noted the lack of contract tracing in HISD, telling the WSWS that after a student displayed symptoms Tuesday, following the first day of school, the district failed to notify any staff or students that were in proximity to the student during classes on Monday. Brandon has since displayed COVID-19 symptoms and voluntarily isolated.

Brandon supported the committee’s demand that the money handed over to the banks and large corporations should instead be used to pay workers to stay home and stop the spread of the pandemic. When asked about the DSA, Brandon stated that they and the Democrats weren’t “left enough” and elaborated that he was “more in line with the socialist view.”



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