

“You are going to have students, employees and the community getting sick and possibly dying.”

Philadelphia educators speak out against the deadly reopening of schools

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Amid the escalating political crisis in the week before Election Day in the US, there is mounting anger among educators in the Philadelphia metropolitan region, where plans are in place to resume in-person teaching next month.

Philadelphia School District, the largest in the state with 125,000 students, is set to resume in-person classes after November 17, while nearby Methacton School District, with roughly 5,000 students, is finalizing plans to resume classes November 9 under the hybrid model.

Pittsburgh Public Schools, with nearly 22,000 students, was planning to reopen under the hybrid model on November 9. Facing backlash from parents and educators at a school board meeting Monday, the district was forced to postpone reopening plans until January.

As is the case throughout the United States, COVID-19 cases have been spiking in Pennsylvania this fall. According to Worldometers, 208,087 people in Pennsylvania have contracted the virus and 8,837 people have died. On Tuesday, 2,751 new cases were reported by health department officials. COVID-19 cases in Allegheny county, which includes Pittsburgh, are also spiking with over 15,000 cases and 422 deaths.

Pennsylvania has a patchwork of 500 school districts, each choosing independently whether to open with face-to-face learning, online learning, or a hybrid model that combines the two. Many teachers returning for face-to-face instruction in districts across the state have reported that they have been given one face mask and a bottle of “blue liquid” as a disinfectant, while others

have been provided with nothing.

The reopening of schools in Pennsylvania takes place under extraordinary political conditions. Pennsylvania voted for Trump in 2016 and is considered a must-win for Trump in the 2020 elections. As a result, Trump has been attacking mail-in balloting in the state as a fraud and is mobilizing police and right-wing militia members to be at the polls Tuesday to intimidate voters.

Following the uncovering of plots to kidnap and kill several governors in swing states, at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania on Monday, Trump led the crowd in a chant of “lock him up,” in a reference to Democratic Governor Tom Wolf.

Despite claims that he is being overly restrictive to prevent the spread of the pandemic, Wolf has in fact adopted the herd immunity policy of the Trump administration and is pushing for the reopening of in-person teaching. Wolf has come under attack from the Trump administration and the Republican-controlled state legislature for not pushing for the reopening of the state’s economy fast enough in the spring.

In Philadelphia, major protests have erupted this week following the police murder of 27-year-old Walter Wallace Jr. The protests have been brutally suppressed by police, who have arrested hundreds of demonstrators, charging dozens with felonious assault on police officers. Hundreds of National Guard troops are expected to arrive in the city today, preparing for a further escalation of the confrontations with protesters.

In Montgomery county near Philadelphia, the Methacton School District is pressing ahead with

reopening plans, despite COVID-19 cases and deaths rising steadily to nearly 14,000 cases and 900 deaths.

An educator from the Methacton School District who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* anonymously for fear of retaliation, stated, “You are going to have students, employees and the community getting sick and possibly dying.”

“Things are getting worse and they want to pack these kids together. I get it, you want the kids to have school, but all Wolf cares about is getting people back to work, not the health of the students.

“The desks are 5 feet by 6 feet. The teachers will have to wipe them down between each class. There are not many details of how this will work. They say they will stagger classes so you don’t have so many students in the hallways, but if you bring the students in, they are going to gather.

“The classes will be smaller, only half the students will come on one day, the other half will be online. This will make it much harder to have to teach both at once, watching a computer screen while trying to teach and talk to the students.”

A Philadelphia bus driver who also wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS, “There were about 80 to 100 drivers that showed up for our kick-off meeting. It was held in the cafeteria which is way too small. Everyone had a face mask, but there were no temperature checks.

Speaking on the unsafe conditions she faces, the bus driver said, “There is no money for additional buses. I have 45 students on my route, which means there could be 20-25 kids on any given day. The CDC recommends one student per seat every other seat. But they said they are going by Montgomery County guidelines, which are weak. For transportation, all they say is what is feasible. If they don’t have the buses, then they will have to fill up the buses they have.

“Contact tracing is a joke. I’m supposed to say if a student doesn’t show up for a few days and then they will contact the school to contact the parents to see what is up. By then it could have spread way out of control.”

Summarizing the economic motives driving state policy, she noted, “Wolf doesn’t care about us, they just want everything open so that they can make their money.”

The American Federation of Teachers Pennsylvania

(AFT-P) and the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) have criminally enabled the drive of big business to force workers back to schools and job sites, vouchsafing plans for a “safe” reopening of schools and the broader economy.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to mobilize educators, bus drivers, parents and students throughout Pennsylvania to close schools in the interests of public health, and to provide full funding and resources for online learning until the pandemic is contained. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to join our committee and contact us today.



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