

Washington D.C. Public Schools halt reopening plans as teachers mount sickout strike

Nick Barrickman
2 November 2020

On Monday, officials in the Washington D.C. Public School (DCPS) system announced a halt to their plans to reopen schools after hundreds of teachers began calling out sick. The sickout took place after a member-wide vote last week of the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) resulted in 93 percent of teachers declaring “no confidence” in Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser’s reopening plans, which had been slated to begin Nov. 9.

The WTU suggested teachers take a “mental health day” before Tuesday’s presidential election. “We are living in turbulent times and teachers are experiencing a great amount of fear and anxiety around the national elections as well as the District’s Return to School Plan,” declared WTU President Elizabeth Davis in an email to teachers Sunday. “While one day off may not by itself cure burnout, a mental health day can provide you with a much-needed and well-deserved break.”

The announcement comes after the Washington D.C. region has seen an increase of COVID-19 cases in its jurisdictions. The seven-day daily average of new cases recorded Monday for Maryland-DC-Virginia stood at 2,274. This exceeded the previous high of 2,218 set during May.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association, 61,000 children caught COVID-19 in the United States last week. In all, over 853,635 children have caught the virus in the US, or nearly 11.1 percent of the total COVID-19 cases in the country, dispelling the myth promoted by Democrats and Republicans across the US that children are less susceptible to the virus and that schools can be reopened “safely.”

The WTU and DCPS officials have been at

loggerheads over certain precautions in the district’s school reopening plan. The plan was to begin allowing 11 students per grade to attend what was being termed “CARE classrooms” starting Nov. 9.

Under the plan, nearly 7,000 of the district’s 47,000 students had been identified to resume in-person learning, ostensibly to remedy the loss of learning occurring among the most vulnerable and developmentally challenged students. This partial reopening is intended to create a wedge to fully reopen schools, in order to force working class parents back into unsafe factories and workplaces producing profit.

Last month, the Public Employees Relations Board ruled that the city’s reopening plan was illegal because it didn’t consult the WTU and others in formulating it. DCPS has maintained that it does not need to have union support for its plans and was prepared to continue with the reopening.

Teachers are demanding that they be given rights to refuse in-person instruction, while DCPS is insisting that only individuals with proven health risks or family members and dependents vulnerable to COVID-19 should be granted such rights. Teachers are also concerned that DCPS’s safety promises will not be met once schools open.

Last month, DCPS announced that they would be pulling middle and high school staff—who are currently maintaining distance learning programs for their students and were not set to return to classes until 2021—to help teach in-person elementary school students. This raised immediate concerns that distance learning would be undermined, as online students would be forced into massive “virtual” classes with a limited number of staff to run them.

In addition to the WTU's promotion of the sickout, the Council of School Officers (CSO), a union overseeing school principals, sent a letter to Bowser and DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee raising objections to the lottery system being used to award seats to students deemed to be most in need.

According to the CSO, the stated goal of partially reopening the school system—to serve students “furthest from opportunity”—is not being done under the current lottery formula. The letter states that the DCPS's criteria for selecting the neediest students awards the same number of seats to students from wealthier schools as it does for those in poorer communities. In poorer schools, 11 seats per grade will hardly make a difference, the principals say. In addition, principals claim they are being cut out of the process of selecting the students who are most in need for in-person learning.

While currently at odds with DCPS on the fine print, the WTU and other associated organizations have sought to collaborate with the school system in its efforts to force a reopening as COVID-19 cases increase. In September, when Bowser announced plans to send children to class even before November, the WTU sought to help identify teachers willing to return.

Last month, WTU President Davis told the *Washington Post*, “We do know that there are extenuating circumstances in regards to [DCPS'] budget and what they can do [to provide safety precautions]. We want to be reasonable in our asks, and we made concessions.”

The WTU's blog post on Sunday states: “While many elements of an agreement have been reached, the Union believes that plans should be revised to ensure greater equity across the city to ensure that students furthest from opportunity have access to additional in-person learning opportunities and that no educator should be required to return to in-person learning if they don't believe adequate protections for themselves, their students and the community are in place.”

As the pandemic deepens and Trump erects barricades around the White House in anticipation of massive Election Day protests, there is mounting anger among teachers and the broader working class in Washington D.C. In order to contain a social explosion on the eve of the US presidential elections, the WTU and DCPS have opted to pull back from having a direct

confrontation with teachers through reopening of schools.

Weighing the possible outcomes of the US elections, the WTU and DCPS calculate that the effort to herd teachers back to classrooms can be better carried out under a potential Democratic Biden presidency than amid popular protests against a threatened Trump putsch to defy the election results and stay in office.

A teacher in nearby Anne Arundel County, Maryland, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “This is a political calculation,” in reference to the decision to keep classes online for elementary school students. They added that the WTU and DCPS are “playing their cards and waiting for another day” to introduce in-person learning.

The teacher noted that in his district teachers are being forced to report to class on schedule next week, stating, “They are not following the science.”

Rather than mobilizing the working class in mass opposition to the homicidal herd immunity policies of the capitalist class and the threat of a Trump dictatorship, the teachers unions and the Democratic Party are seeking to divide and restrain the working class in order to better carry out the policies of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus.

It is essential that teachers in the Washington, DC area and throughout the US take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file safety committees controlled by and answerable to the teachers themselves in order to fight off the threat to their health, safety and democratic rights.

We encourage all teachers in DCPS to join the national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and take the crucial step of forming a local committee in Washington, DC. Contact us today and we will do everything in our power to help you build a committee and coordinate your struggles with educators and workers throughout the region, across the US and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact