

Brookline, Massachusetts educators begin sickout strike as state officials push to keep schools open

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On Monday, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker announced new restrictions in response to a spike in coronavirus cases in the state. Sunday marked the ninth straight day the state had reported more than 1,000 new infections, while the three-day average for COVID-related hospitalizations has jumped by nearly 40 percent over the course of the last month, from 432 to 602.

The Republican governor has repeatedly vowed that Massachusetts would not return to the “lockdown” implemented in the early months of the pandemic and the new measures make this clear. The new set of targeted restrictions tightens a mask-wearing order, imposes a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew for all but “essential” activities, as well as ordering restaurants, liquor stores, gyms, casinos and theaters to close at 9:30 p.m.

However, Baker and state school officials have placed a premium on opening schools despite the dangers faced by students, teachers and their families, and these new restrictions do nothing to change that. Schools across the state remain a patchwork of partially opened districts, hybrid and fully remote learning, with the health and safety of communities hanging in the balance.

There is mounting opposition to the opening of schools among educators across Massachusetts and the entire country. In the Greater Boston town of Brookline on Monday, the Brookline Educators Union (BEU) announced that they intend to strike Tuesday after the Brookline School Committee’s “decision to renege on its support for maintaining 6 feet of social distancing within public schools to best prevent against the spread of COVID-19,” BEU President Jessica Wender-Shubow said in a statement.

In a letter to Brookline parents, the school committee said that it reserved the right at any point to adjust “best practices” for school safety, including mandating 6-foot distancing, as “best practices can change.” The school committee has filed a petition for a strike investigation with the Massachusetts Department of Labor Relations. Massachusetts law prohibits public employees from striking.

A Brookline paraeducator who wished to remain anonymous

told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re doing a sickout tomorrow. We’ve been trying to sit down with the school committee for months to come up with a new MOA, and they’ve been refusing to discuss anything. At a meeting last Wednesday, they said they’d walk back the 6-foot rule, which could increase class sizes from eight to 25 and cause the air filters to not clean the air properly.”

He added, “They’re not letting us be safe. The rules we have set in place right now are hard to follow. We’ve had at least two emails go out announcing infections since our school reopened last week, one of which happened at school, and they’re not telling us who it was or what class.”

Boston Public Schools (BPS) suspended all in-person learning on October 22 after the citywide coronavirus positivity rate, which reflects the number of people who test positive for the virus out of the total number of tests conducted, hit 5.7 percent. Schools had opened for in-person learning for “high needs” students beginning October 1.

Despite growing cases, positivity rates and hospitalizations in Boston since early September, BPS remained open for weeks for these students and attempts were made to bring even more students back for in-person learning. This was after positivity rates had climbed above the 4 percent threshold agreed upon between the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) and BPS as the cutoff point for in-person learning.

Massachusetts education officials have been aggressive in their drive to open schools despite rising COVID-19 cases. On October 27, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Jeffrey Riley made the remarkable statement to lawmakers that “districts and schools currently open for in-person instruction are encouraged to remain open even if their local community is designated as red, so long as there is no evidence of COVID-19 transmission in schools.”

In Massachusetts, school districts’ reporting of coronavirus cases is voluntary, so on precisely what “evidence” the DESE commissioner is basing his recommendation is not clear. What is clear, however, is that more than a third of the state’s 351 cities and towns are now at “high risk,” meaning they have

more than eight cases per 100,000 residents. While the governor on Monday urged residents to avoid gathering outside their households, the state is advising students and parents to attend schools where they will inevitably pass the contagion on to each other and bring it home to their communities.

In Boston, the BTU signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with BPS that mandated schools close when the positivity rate rose above 4 percent. But rates of 4.4 percent were reached in the city October 4–10, and 5.7 percent October 11–17. In the weeks leading up to the school closings, the BTU attempted to place blame on BPS and Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, for not upholding the agreement, seeking an injunction against BPS in court.

However, when the schools were not immediately closed, the BTU did not call its membership out on strike but merely planned “Days of Action” with protests intended to let off steam. A look at the MOA signed by BTU President Jessica Tang on September 9 reveals it is filled with loopholes and contradictions placing teachers and students in the dangerous conditions they later protested.

Rather than demanding all schools have proper HVAC filtering systems, the agreement simply mandates that teachers have rooms with windows for open air. It states: “Schools without automated HVAC systems will operate with a combination of mechanical ventilation and open windows to maintain maximum ventilation without affecting recommended humidity and temperature levels (generally 68-77 degrees).”

By mid-October, teachers were posting tweets of videos from their classrooms with half-open windows and box fans with temperatures in the low 60s and high 50s, debating whether to freeze or potentially let the virus build up inside the classroom. While the BTU instructed teachers to share these and other unsafe conditions at #SafetyFirstBPS and point fingers at Walsh and the BPS, it was the BTU that knowingly agreed to putting teachers and students back to work under these conditions.

The MOA agreement demands that educators assigned in classrooms without windows or adequate ventilation as defined by DESE guidance and the BPS plan must be given an alternative workspace that does have windows or otherwise meets DESE guidance for air ventilation. It goes on to say that rooms not meeting these standards shall not be “used for in-person instruction or for workspace occupied by more than one person *to the extent the size of the workspace does not allow for appropriate social distancing in accordance with public health guidelines*” (emphasis added). This would allow for the BPS to potentially force teachers and students into unventilated classrooms as long as they can remain 6 feet apart!

The loophole that allowed the schools to stay open after passing the 4 percent citywide positivity rate threshold comes later in the agreement. It states that after this threshold is reached, “BPS will transition to full remote learning for all students and BTU bargaining unit members will have the

option to be remote as well.” But the MOA immediately goes on to say, “When the Boston Public Health Commission or other City or State authority determines that the school district can reopen, BTU bargaining unit members will be expected to return to BPS buildings.”

The MOA also does not require proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and contact tracing. Teachers are to be given “two reusable masks/face coverings,” although some teacher tweets report receiving none at all. Teachers who feel they need an “extra layer of protection” would be able to “request that the district provide a face shield, as available[!], in addition to a standard medical mask.”

For contact tracing, the district will coordinate with the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) to notify only students and staff who have been in contact “during the confirmed positive case’s infectious period as identified by public officials from the local board of health managing the confirmed positive case.”

BTU President Jessica Tang stated following the signing of the MOA, “The Mayor was able to really bring everyone together to make sure we had a plan that put the public good at the center of the discussions. The details matter, and together with the Mayor and with BPS, we have made tremendous progress toward establishing conditions that will provide critical supports as we all seek to ensure the best educational experience possible under what are unprecedented conditions.”

The BTU’s website it currently plastered with giant letters screaming “BTU: All in for Biden Harris,” a reference to the Democratic presidential candidates who support reopening schools and businesses despite the great dangers posed.

There is immense opposition developing among educators and the entire working class to the homicidal policies of reopening schools and workplaces. 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 looking to carry forward this struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today.



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