

“We have the power to save ourselves and our students”

Pennsylvania teacher speaks on the US elections and the crisis in public education

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6 November 2020

As in the rest of the United States, the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread throughout Pennsylvania as case numbers, hospitalizations and deaths climb to new heights. Over 225,698 people in Pennsylvania have contracted COVID-19, while over 9,003 have now died, figures that are set to grow rapidly in the coming weeks.

On Thursday, the Pennsylvania Department of Health reported that there were over 2,900 new cases of COVID-19 in the state. The seven-day average has increased to over 2,000 new cases a day from under 500 in June.

The massive spike in the spread of COVID-19 corresponds with the resumption of face-to-face instruction in K-12 schools, which is proving to be highly dangerous for students and educators. Over the summer, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf lifted the stay-at-home order and allowed each of the state's 500 school districts to set their own policy for returning to in-person teaching.

Alexandra Chitwood, 47, a counselor for the Manheim Township Middle School for over 20 years, is now the latest victim of the homicidal campaign to reopen schools. On Thursday morning, the principal informed the school community of her death. The school district has been holding face-to-face classes since the start of the school year and has only temporarily suspended in-person classes at the middle school where Chitwood worked, while keeping all other district schools open.

Despite Wolf's lifting of the stay-at-home order and the reopening of much of Pennsylvania schools and universities for in-person learning, the Wolf administration has been targeted by the Trump administration for not reopening quickly enough. Pennsylvania was a critical swing state which Trump had to win to remain President. During the election campaign and since Election Day on Tuesday, Trump has frequently claimed the vote was being rigged, while at campaign rallies he led his supporters in chants of “lock him up” directed at Wolf.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a teacher and

mother of two who works in Reading, Pennsylvania, about the political situation and her thoughts on the reopening of schools in the Democrat-led state. To protect her anonymity, she will be referred to in this article as Patti instead of her real name.

Referring to Trump's remarks Thursday night when he declared himself the winner of the election and falsely claimed that there was massive voter fraud in Pennsylvania and other states, Patti said, “Every word was a lie. NBC didn't even show the whole thing, they went back to their anchor and said that Trump was spouting misinformation.” She added, “It was like watching a temper tantrum.”

Stressing the urgency of the situation and the dangers of Trump's coup plotting, she said, “We can't wait for the election results to be finalized because then it will be too late to take a stand.”

In discussing the possibility of a Biden presidency, Patti is worried that people will stop protesting the reopening of schools and businesses, stating, “If Biden wins, then people will relax as if things will just get better and won't be willing to fight anymore.”

She stressed the need for educators and other workers to not defer to the Democrats and instead take matters into their own hands to close schools and stop the spread of the pandemic, saying, “Things will not change unless we stop being hopeful that someone will come to save us with a ‘stay-at-home’ order. This is bigger than COVID, it's about education in this country which we all know is not what it should be to be best for our students. We have the power to save ourselves and our students.”

Commenting on the disastrous reopening of schools in the state, Patti said, “We should not be opening, this is crazy. I get it, parents need to go back to work, but people are dying.” She added, “These kids can get it and will bring it home to their families and communities. That is why we are seeing the cases going up and up.”

Reading is located about 60 miles northwest of

Philadelphia. It has the highest poverty rate for any city in Pennsylvania and one of the highest in the nation. Before the pandemic hit, over 35 percent of all residents lived below the official poverty line, defined by the federal government as living on \$21,720 for a family of three per year, or just \$1,810 per month.

Patti commented on the deindustrialization in the city and region, saying, “When the steel industry went out, the jobs went and everyone was stuck here.” With the onset of the pandemic, unemployment and poverty shot up in Pennsylvania, while food banks report that demand is way up as families don’t have enough to eat.

Patti described the impacts of poverty on her students, saying, “You see these problems with the kids. Sometimes they come in really tired and hungry. Have they eaten breakfast? Have they been eating lunch? What is their home life like?”

“Then I find out stuff about their home life. The kids don’t care about school, it is the least of their worries. In the grand scale of their life, having a pencil for school is not their biggest problem. It is a very complicated issue.

“This is not the best for parents, I get it. I called a parent the other day to let her know her son wasn’t attending ZOOM classes, and she asked me ‘what’s more important, I can either go to work and make sure they get food on the table or stay home and make sure they are on the computer. I can’t do both.’”

Patti described the utter disrepair of school buildings in her district, saying, “I go into school and I see mice droppings, there are dead mice throughout the building. Mold is everywhere.”

She noted that the heating and ventilation system is so old that water constantly accumulates on ceiling tiles and causes mold to grow, noting, “Every few months they come and spray paint the ceiling tiles to cover up the mold. Once they replaced the tiles, but that is not fixing the problem.” Among other problems, high levels of airborne mold spores can cause allergic reactions, asthma, sinus congestion and other respiratory problems.

Another major problem students face is the continual harassment and deportation of their parents by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. Reading has a large immigrant population and ICE agents often conduct sweeps of workplaces and neighborhoods.

Patti asked, “How can a student concentrate on school when pickups are being done? People are going to the bus stop and not coming home because ICE comes and grabs them.”

Patti feels that the administration is not doing enough to promote the health of the students. Her children attend school where face-to-face instruction has started. “Some

teachers just wear a face shield, others don’t wear anything,” she noted. “How do you expect the kids to wear masks if the teachers aren’t? This is coming from the administration, they set the guidelines.”

“When Wolf shut things down in March, I thought he would do something about the pandemic. It is worse now and he is allowing the districts to open back up. If something doesn’t make sense, it is usually the money. They don’t care about the people.”

Asked about the role of the teachers union, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), Patti said, “The president and all their minions totally dropped the ball. They are going along with whatever Wolf and the districts say. They are not working to protect the teachers and the students. You have 10 days to file a grievance, and when you ask them about it, they tell you that you are not following the ‘chain of command.’ That is just code words for ‘I don’t want to be bothered.’”

Patti is a member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed to unite educators, parents and students with the broader working class in order to halt in-person learning and close non-essential businesses until the pandemic is contained, and to secure the social needs of the working class.

Describing why she joined the committee, Patti said, “It is up to us to do something. A lot of teachers feel overwhelmed as it is. A lot of people are feeling hopeless and alone, and that nobody is helping them. They think that all we have left is if the state mandates the shutdown. But they are not going to do it. Many still think someone is going to step in for them. We have got to do it ourselves.

“I think one of the reasons the administration keeps us so busy with regulations and new curricula is so that we are so busy we can’t think about politics, can’t think about what is going on. But we have to, we have to be the ones that do something.”

Only through the independent initiative of educators and the entire working class will a genuine struggle be made to close schools, provide the necessary resources for online learning, and stop the spread of the pandemic. We urge all educators, parents and students in Pennsylvania and across the US to join and help build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Send us your contact information today to get involved.



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