

Growing opposition among educators forces closure of schools as pandemic spreads

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Across the United States, there is deepening anger and opposition developing among educators, parents and students to the homicidal policies of keeping schools opened as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads out of control. With cases climbing in every state, hospitals reaching or exceeding their capacity, and the death toll forecast to balloon in the coming weeks, the growing militancy of educators is forcing school districts to temporarily reverse their policies and switch to online learning.

On Monday and Tuesday, at least a third of all teachers called in sick at Southern Lehigh High School in Center Valley, Pennsylvania. With the Pennsylvania State Education Association doing nothing to organize opposition to in-person learning, it appears that teachers took action themselves and independently organized a wildcat sickout strike. In response to the sickout, school administrators herded all students into the school cafeteria instead of switching to remote learning, creating the conditions for a potential “super-spreader” event at the school. The massive Parkland High complex in nearby Allentown, which serves 32,000 area students, closed for two days.

On Thursday, Detroit Public Schools announced the halting of all in-person learning beginning Monday and lasting through at least January 11, in response to a major surge of the pandemic in the city and throughout Michigan. On Wednesday, the state had the fourth highest number of new COVID-19 cases in the US at 6,620.

In recent weeks, outbreaks at K-12 schools in Michigan have skyrocketed, with 44 new outbreaks the first week of November 2 and another 50 new outbreaks last week, including four outbreaks in Wayne County, where Detroit is located. Other districts in the state have also switched to online learning in recent days, including Grosse Pointe, Holly, Huron Valley, Pontiac, Rochester and Utica, while others that began online and had considered reopening

have chosen to continue remote learning.

On Tuesday, Philadelphia School District officials announced that they will delay plans to reopen schools under the hybrid model, which had been scheduled to begin on November 30. The following day, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia urged surrounding districts to switch to remote learning as well, warning of a “catastrophic situation” developing in the region. Pennsylvania recorded 6,023 new cases Thursday, the 13th highest figure in the US, with 1,159 in Philadelphia County.

Per state guidelines, all districts in Philadelphia, Bucks, Delaware and Montgomery Counties should be closed, as there is “substantial transmission” throughout these regions. However, Pennsylvania’s health secretary, Rachel Levine, stated earlier this week that the state will not mandate school closures as it did in the spring.

There is growing pressure among New York City educators to stop in-person learning in the largest school district in the US. Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio is expected to make an announcement in the coming days about whether he will abide by his own policies as the infection rate in the city approaches the three percent mark, which would technically require schools to close.

In an effort to forestall the closure of schools, *New York Times* education writer Eliza Shapiro penned a column Wednesday urging de Blasio to reconsider, writing, “Transmission of the virus in schools has been strikingly low, with a positive-test rate of just 0.17 percent according to the most recent data.” She omits the fact that these figures are based on testing a tiny fraction of the district’s students and staff, and that the test positivity rate among children under four years old in the city is 3.2 percent, while that of 13-17 year olds has ranged from 2.6-3.9 percent in recent weeks.

The *Times* Editorial Board issued a statement Wednesday urging de Blasio not to close schools.

“Ending in-person instruction right now would be a mistake, given the evidence of how little the virus has spread there so far and the devastating consequences that would follow for academic progress as well as for working parents like subway operators and nurses.” The real concern of the *Times* and the Democratic Party establishment is not the academic progress of the city’s youth—who have long been the victims of bipartisan budget cuts, supported by the *Times*—but that the closure of the nation’s largest school district would cut across the back-to-work campaign by Trump and both parties and undermine corporate profits.

In contrast to the false narrative pushed by the *Times* and other major outlets, the reopening of K-12 schools has been an unmitigated disaster which has already caused nearly 150,000 infections and at least 50 deaths of educators and students since late July. These figures are likely significant underestimates, given that there are no national agencies tracking outbreaks or deaths connected to school reopenings.

On Thursday, news broke that 38-year-old Iowa teacher Jason Englert died November 8, three days after testing positive for COVID-19. Last week, five-year-old Tagan Drone, a kindergartener in Texas, died of COVID-19 after being turned away from a hospital. Her death is the latest in a growing number of students that have succumbed to the virus after the reopening of schools, including 13-year-old Peyton Baumgarth of Missouri.

There is a large body of US and international evidence demonstrating the obvious fact that schools are major vectors for the spread of COVID-19. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that in October alone there were nearly 200,000 COVID-19 cases among children in the US. In the first week of November, there were a staggering 73,883 recorded child COVID-19 cases, while there was a 17 percent increase in child cases from October 22 to November 5.

The moves to close schools have predominantly taken place in Democrat-led cities, while Republican-controlled districts have largely opted to remain open, including in states across the South and Midwest that are experiencing the most severe spread of the virus.

The only reason some Democrat-led districts have closed schools is because these officials are attuned to the mounting opposition and determination to struggle among educators, particularly amid the unprecedented political crisis in which Donald Trump is seeking to nullify the elections and establish a personalist dictatorship. The Democrats’ greatest fear is the development of any

movement of the working class outside of their control and independent of their allies in the unions.

Whatever their tactical maneuvers, the Democratic Party is equally beholden to Wall Street and will reopen schools as soon as they deem it politically viable, in order to force parents to continue working in unsafe factories and workplaces where the virus is running rampant. On Thursday, the Biden transition team publicly distanced itself from statements made by Dr. Michael Osterholm advocating renewed lockdowns to contain the pandemic, stating that such policies are not “in line” with their program. Osterholm was forced to walk back from his statement.

In order to prevent the future reopening of schools that have switched to online learning and to ensure that all schools and nonessential workplaces across the US close immediately to contain the pandemic, educators and the working class as a whole must take matters into their own hands. That means forming rank-and-file safety committees, which are independent of the unions, which have fully collaborated in the reopening of schools in New York City, Houston and other major urban centers, while pursuing impotent legal appeals in Republican-led states that have amounted to nothing.

Trump’s efforts to carry out a coup, which take place amid a vast expansion of the pandemic, make clear that the public health and political dangers confronting workers are enormous and deeply intertwined. The struggle facing educators and all workers is inherently political and must be animated by a determined opposition to both big business parties.

The critical task facing educators is to expand the network of independent rank-and-file safety committees that have been established in cities and states across the US and internationally. These committees must fight to unite with autoworkers, logistics workers, healthcare workers, meatpackers, and the entire working class, in preparations for a political general strike. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to get involved today.



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