

Texas educators demand fully online learning to save lives

Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
16 November 2020

Texas has surpassed the grim total of more than 1 million coronavirus infections, with 12,461 new cases Friday. A primary factor in the explosion of cases is the reopening of schools for in-person classes at the start of October, an essential component of the broader campaign to reopen non-essential businesses.

The criminal policies of returning to face-to-face education, reopening non-essential businesses, and neglecting workers' safety at essential businesses are all part of a conscious class strategy of the financial oligarchy, who seek to expand their profits through the ramped-up exploitation of workers regardless of how many lives are lost. According to official data, there have been 20,140 deaths from COVID-19 in Texas as of this writing, while the number of daily new cases surpassed 12,000 three times last week.

In Texas, both the Republicans and the Democrats have worked to reopen businesses, with state Republicans threatening to revoke funding from schools that close due to safety concerns. The Texas American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has worked to channel teachers' opposition behind the Democratic Party and put the blame for the reopening solely on the Republicans, incessantly telling teachers that Democrats will resolve the crisis if elected.

Houston, Austin and Dallas, each a viral epicenter following the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses, all have Democratic mayors. Last week, Texas public schools alone recorded over 6,600 cases among students and staff, while in total there have been nearly 40,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases tied to schools.

Dallas ISD, which reopened on September 28, has recorded 837 cases since October 7. Fort Worth ISD reopened on October 5, and there have now been more than 74,000 total COVID-19 cases in the Dallas-Fort Worth area since the start of in-person classes, with a current daily average of 1,944 new cases per day.

Harris County, where Houston is located, has seen the largest number of COVID-19 cases in the state at over 170,000, along with an alarming increase in hospitalizations. Houston ISD, whose reopening was endorsed by city, state and national Democrats, has reported 326 cases since September 28.

The day after schools reopened in Houston, multiple outbreaks forced 20 schools to shut down for quarantine. After the district immediately reopened schools and increased the case threshold for a future shutdown, more than 150 teachers in Houston ISD and two surrounding districts held a wildcat sickout strike. The Houston Federation of Teachers, an AFT affiliate, refused to support or even acknowledge this wildcat sickout. Teachers have since told of harrowing conditions in Houston schools, with one high school teacher reporting six classrooms having to be quarantined with over 100 students affected after teachers tested positive for the virus, with little to no contract tracing done by the district.

The Democratic Party has similarly embraced the policy of "herd immunity." President-elect Joe Biden, who pushed reopenings in April during a peak in the pandemic, stated this month at a town hall meeting in Philadelphia, "I don't think there's a need to lock down," adding, "I laid out a plan [on] how you can open businesses."

Notably, Biden's coronavirus task force includes figures such as Ezekiel Emanuel, who has called for rationing health care and leaving old people and infants vulnerable, infamously writing in a December 1996 Hastings Center Report that "services provided to individuals who are irreversibly prevented from being or becoming participating citizens are not basic and should not be guaranteed. An obvious example is not guaranteeing health services to patients with dementia."

The return to in-person classes in Texas and the disastrous consequences in case increases and deaths

expose the lies of a “safe return” and highlight the necessity of a broader movement of educators and the entire working class to shut down in-person classes. The unplanned and unfunded transition to virtual learning has left many students stranded academically and caused teachers to have to work overtime dealing with the numerous technical and pedagogical issues stemming from the lack of guidance, technical assistance, funds, and training on the part of the state and federal governments.

Compounding these issues are wide disparities in home access to the Internet, computers, and quality cameras and microphones, with many resorting to using smartphones in lieu of a proper computer system. As a result of decades of budget cuts, school districts are unable to provide these technologies for their students, with shortages disproportionately affecting students from working class and immigrant families.

Failure to prioritize online education has forced parents to choose between their family’s health and their children’s education. This problem is most sharply articulated in charter schools across the state that are more concerned with protecting state funding revenue streams than students, teachers, and our families.

Recent interviews with teachers and students throughout the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex reveal the extent to which the health and well-being of children and teachers have been subordinated to the demands of the financial oligarchy.

A worker at Life Charter Schools spoke of conditions in which substitute teachers or temporary replacements outnumbered homeroom teachers by a significant margin. “They’re putting those subs through hell. They have them running back and forth between classrooms, and some of the subs aren’t even prepared to teach the class or subject they were assigned due to last-minute changes.”

Describing the unsafe conditions, the teacher said, “Some of the lower grades, including K-2, aren’t required to wear masks, and subs show up not expecting that. If they leave, they probably won’t get any more work, but how is that okay? They are even looking for substitute nurses. Everything is falling apart.”

The insidious incentive structure devised by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Republican Governor Greg Abbott in July, which ties school and district funding to a baseline of in-person attendance, has been used to disincentivize the adoption of safety measures and the provision of resources to online learning. The unions have not lifted a finger to oppose this criminal policy. On the contrary, their only concern has been to ensure the

solvency of their dues streams at the expense of educators’ lives.

There is no lack of militancy on the part of teachers to fight the reopening of schools, but what is required is the development of organization and leadership. In order to break free from the stranglehold of the unions and both big business parties, we have founded the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, as part of a network of similar committees throughout the United States, including in New York City, Detroit, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Florida, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Traditional unions and labor structures often discriminate against immigrants, temporary workers, employees of religiously affiliated institutions, and those without the financial capacity to commit to dues. In contrast, we fight for the unity of all workers in a common struggle in defense of our health and safety.

As educators, we are fully aware of the financial pressures bearing down upon every worker under the pandemic. We are similarly cognizant of the wide variety of challenges that face teachers, cafeteria workers, custodians, support staff, office staff, substitutes, nurses, counselors and all educators at public, private and charter schools.

Our committee aims to unite all these education workers with the broader working class, to halt nonessential production and stop the spread of the pandemic. We demand a full transition to online learning and the seizing of resources from the financial oligarchy to guarantee the right of all students to receive the education they deserve from within the safety of their homes.

We reiterate all of our prior demands toward the provision of physical and economic security for workers and families, and we reinvigorate our push to achieve them with a call to educators, parents and students in Texas to join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Outside of Texas, we urge all readers to join a local or statewide rank-and-file committee in your region, or to begin the process of starting a committee in your area.



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