Utah teachers stage wildcat sickout to demand COVID-19 testing, online instruction as cases soar

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Last Thursday, dozens of teachers across the state of Utah participated in a wildcat sickout strike which they dubbed a "test out," as they used a sick day to get tested for COVID-19. This was the first organized action taken by teachers independently of the unions.

Announcing the event on the Facebook group "Teachers Take Charge," educators wrote: "Our state fails to protect teachers and provide testing… Enough is enough! Let's make our voices heard."

Melissa, a teacher in Granite School District, supported the initiative as a means to actually fight for systematic testing, safe conditions in schools and a return to online instruction. "If 15 cases are identified in a school, then the school is supposed to shut down," Melissa told the *World Socialist Web Site*, referring to state guidelines, "but this rule is not being followed." She stressed that even in Corner Canyon High School, where active case numbers rose to 70, "the school was not shut down."

As they fight to defend themselves and their students, educators face growing opposition from the pro-corporate teachers unions. In an interview with a local news station, Utah Education Association (UEA) President Heidi Matthews spoke against the wildcat sickout, asking educators to "be patient" and let the union negotiate with state and local politicians. "A widespread statewide testing protocol is in the works," Matthews said, adding, "We at the Utah Education Association have been in contact with the governor's office."

While the union negotiates with the state behind closed doors, the situation is becoming ever more life-threatening as cases surge throughout Utah and across the United States, with all-time daily records for new cases, hospitalizations and deaths. Utah reported 4,986 new COVID-19 cases on Nov. 14, an astronomical increase from 175 new cases on Aug. 23, around the time that the fall semester started.

Every county in Utah has been designated as having a "very high" infection rate, meaning that there are over 200 infected persons per 100,000 within a 14-day period. Numerous counties have a 14-day infection rate that is well over 1,000. Teachers in Salt Lake County have to teach nearly full in-person classrooms of students for four to five days a week, while the 14-day infection count is 1,285. What is certain is that the number of deaths in the state, which now stands at 718, will increase dramatically in the days ahead.

Republican Governor Gary Herbert responded to the skyrocketing case and hospitalization numbers last week with ineffective half-measures, mandating masks and postponing extracurricular activities. He also placed a ban on casual social gatherings until Nov. 23, giving the green light for Thanksgiving celebrations. Mandatory student testing in higher education institutions must be implemented by Jan. 1, but schools will be allowed to continue in-person instruction. Nothing is in place to reverse the current exponential rise in cases.

As Governor Herbert made clear in his recent announcement, "Utah is open for business."

Despite these horrific figures and conditions, teachers are being forced to teach in-person and risk their lives, as the vast majority of Utah public schools have some form of in-person instruction.

The WSWS also spoke with a kindergarten teacher that works in Salt Lake City, who insisted, "The unions are not doing enough to defend teachers, but some teachers have a false confidence in them." She noted that the school board discusses returning to in-person instruction "at every board meeting, and is demeaning to teachers opposing them."

Where schools currently have in-person instruction in

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Salt Lake City, students are regularly out for quarantine without real support or information. The teacher commented, “When my child was exposed and we had to quarantine, I never received a letter with any details. The school just said that they were too backed up to send it.” This experience has convinced her of the need to build rank-and-file safety committees that are democratically controlled by workers themselves.

The majority of educators, school staff, parents and students oppose subordinating human lives to the profit interests of the ultra-rich and are looking for a way to fight back. Measures can and must be taken to implement a shutdown of all schools and non-essential workplaces, mass testing and contact tracing, safe conditions and protective gear for essential workers, and full compensation to all nonessential workers and small businesses who are impacted by these necessary, life-saving policies.

The fight for these scientific and rational demands can only be achieved through the formation of independent rank-and-file safety committees. These committees have been growing in number throughout the United States as a necessary response to the callous and ambivalent behavior of the teachers unions, which are subservient to the Democratic Party.

The Granite Education Association recently blackmailed teachers working in Granite School District that participated in the sickout strike, writing in a leaked email, “We always caution teachers about taking actions that could potentially impact their employment status. Something like a ‘sick-out’ could land you in a potential disciplinary meeting with your principal.” In the event teachers are targeted by their administration for striking, the union warns, “We will represent our members in such cases, but the chances of not being disciplined are low.”

Granite School District, located in Salt Lake County, already took the extraordinary measure of fining teachers $1,000 for resigning over health concerns as schools reopened to in-person teaching in mid-August, which is legally enforced by the union contract.

In an attempt to prevent the struggles of educators from finding independent expression, and sensing an opportunity to grab dues from their rival union, the American Federation of Teachers Utah (AFT-U) has tried to pose as a more militant union that demands a return to online instruction and supports sickouts, protests and other actions.

Educators cannot allow their efforts to be strangled by this organization. AFT Utah is relatively small compared to the Utah Education Association (UEA), but they are equally pro-capitalist and tied to the Democratic Party, and are desperately working to contain teachers opposition and enforce the supposedly “safe” reopening of schools.

On their homepage, AFT-U praises the incoming Biden administration and highlights the national AFT “Plan to Safely Reopen Schools and Communities.” AFT-U Vice President Ani Ostendorff states, “We want to return to school to teach our students, and we want to do so in a scenario that is safe, sustainable, and responsive to changing conditions.” Ostendorff suggests contacting “your local leaders to voice your opinions,” that is, appeal to politicians who have no intent to halt the spread of the virus and protect the working class.

At the tertiary education level, the AFT-U has allowed faculty and students to return to several colleges and universities in the state, resulting in an increased spread of the virus and potentially deaths. Utah Valley University, a public state university where AFT-U has active members, has recorded 756 self-reported cases of COVID-19 from faculty and students since the start of the school year on Aug. 24.

Salt Lake Community College, which the AFT-U has allowed to reopen to some in-person instruction, reports 305 cases since Aug. 25, with 90 of those among faculty members and 39 reported in the past week alone.

The formation of independent rank-and-file safety committees is an urgent necessity in order to save lives and combat the spread of COVID-19. These democratic committees of teachers must seek unification with all sections of the working class, including workers in the auto industry, health care, logistics, meat processing and beyond, in preparations for a nationwide general strike to close schools and all nonessential workplaces. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to send us your contact information today at wsws.org/edsafety.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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