

New York City educators and parents must take control over online learning! Schools must stay closed until the pandemic is contained!

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
19 November 2020

This statement was adopted unanimously by the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at its weekly meeting on Wednesday, November 18. We urge all educators, parents and students in the city and surrounding region to join and help build the committee today! Sign up today.

The announcement Wednesday that New York City schools will switch to remote learning marks a significant turning point in the bipartisan campaign to open schools and businesses across the United States amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

The closure of schools in the largest school district in the country will stimulate calls to halt in-person instruction in districts across the US that remain open or plan to reopen, including in other Democrat-led school districts such as Los Angeles, Houston, and Salt Lake City, as well as Republican-led districts and states that have most ruthlessly pursued the “herd immunity” policies of the Trump administration.

The immediate impetus for the closure of schools is the fact that the citywide seven-day rolling average test positivity rate has surpassed three percent, the unsafe threshold agreed upon by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) President Michael Mulgrew. The underlying cause of the shutdown, however, is both parties’ recognition of the mounting opposition among educators, parents and students, which found expression in the mass absenteeism across the city and growing denunciations on social media, and threatened to break out of their control.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee warns that the closure of schools is a temporary maneuver, and the unions and Democratic Party will work together to ensure that schools reopen as soon as they deem it politically viable.

We call on educators, parents and students to demand no resumption of in-person learning until a proven vaccine has been verified and distributed free of charge. All non-essential production must be halted, essential workers must be fully protected and all workers and parents isolating at home must be provided with all the resources they need to survive.

Both de Blasio and Mulgrew have signaled that they intend to reopen schools once the test positivity rate declines, with Mulgrew

tweeting Wednesday, “Now it’s the job of all New Yorkers to maintain social distance, wear masks and take all other steps to substantially lower the infection rate so school buildings can reopen for in-person instruction.” De Blasio was even more blunt, tweeting, “We’ll return to in-person learning as soon as possible.”

The shutdown of schools follows weeks in which increasing numbers of classrooms and whole schools were quarantined. According to the Department of Education website, between September 14 and November 17, 2,306 COVID-19 cases were reported in district schools, including 1,067 teachers and 1,239 students.

Before today’s announcement, 78 schools across the city were already closed, with their entire school communities quarantined for two weeks due to multiple positive cases within a short span of time. Over 1,450 individual classrooms in hundreds of other schools were shut for quarantining due to positive cases, usually discovered days after the potential exposure took place.

The testing regime put forward by the city and endorsed by the UFT of 10-20 percent of individuals in schools every few weeks was analyzed to be flawed to the point where it could miss major outbreaks, and our committee has emphasized that the testing system was doing more to conceal outbreaks than expose them.

The plan by Democratic Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio to shut down individual schools within the city and “quarantine” neighborhoods, or so-called microclusters, was always an unscientific policy designed to keep as many schools open as possible. Across the region, cases have been rising for the last month, with New Jersey and Connecticut experiencing higher positivity rates than New York, underscoring the porous character of city and state boundaries and the ability of the virus to spread rapidly due to the reopening of businesses and schools.

Moreover, the American Academy of Pediatrics has reported as of Monday that over 1 million children have been confirmed to have had COVID-19, or one in 11 infected individuals in the US.

The unplanned, citywide school closures will disrupt the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers in New York City, forcing parents to stay at home with their kids, risking unemployment and poverty. The terrible conditions that educators teaching remotely

have faced, including massive under-staffing that has produced class sizes upwards of 60 students, will be worsened in the coming days.

The massive infusion of resources necessary to provide universal access to high quality remote learning—and to secure the livelihoods of parents and all workers—will not be provided by the pro-corporate Democrats and their trade union lackeys. Only through the independent organization of workers, in opposition to the Democratic Party, the trade unions, and all groups in their orbit such as the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE), can the interests of the entire working class begin to be fought for.

Accordingly, the NYC Educators Rank and File Safety Committee puts forward the following demands, which are updated since our committee was founded on September 10:

- We demand an end to all plans to reinstate in-person learning across K-12 public schools and for the suspension of all in-person instruction for public, private and charter schools and colleges in New York City and the Metropolitan area.

- We demand that all decisions on reopening schools be determined democratically by rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students in each school in collaboration with trusted scientists and health experts, and in coordination with representatives from Educator Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the city.

- We demand teachers and students be *guaranteed* the technology necessary to participate in their studies for the duration of the pandemic, including high-quality computer hardware and software and all other accessories. High-speed internet access must be provided to all families free of charge, by using the untapped resources of the telecommunications corporations.

- Halt all nonessential production! Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

- We demand full employment security and wages for all workers in New York City and a reinstatement of the increased federal and state unemployment benefits and the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance that came from the CARES Act. The threat of layoffs, reduced hours and pay, and forced retirement issued by the mayor and cynically repeated by the UFT and Transport Workers Union, the union of MTA workers, underscores the reactionary character of the Democratic Party and its backers in the trade unions. We reject any form of austerity in the home of Wall Street and the center of world capitalism. The vast wealth of the financial oligarchy must be heavily taxed to pay for the health

and safety of all workers and the education of the younger generation!

- We demand the immediate freezing of college tuition and abolition of student loan debt, as well as free housing and meals to all international students and others in need wishing to remain as residents on campuses during remote learning.

- We demand the immediate retrofitting of all classrooms and school buildings to ensure they have modern, high quality ventilation systems and air purifiers. The high rates of asthma and autism in the poorest parts of the city have been linked to terrible quality of air in poorly built buildings, with asbestos and lead residue being the most common. Such conditions in school buildings should not be tolerated.

- We demand all homeless and home-insecure students and families be provided free, safe, and dignified housing for the duration of the pandemic, in a system that expands on the city's current program for housing mainly homeless individuals. The expense of all such housing and technological development must be taxed out of the billions of dollars in profits accumulated by the financial oligarchy.

- We demand full protection for undocumented immigrant workers and their children, including full income support or unemployment benefits while they are unable to work or choose not to work in unsafe conditions. We demand a halt to all imprisonment and deportation by the federal authorities and the abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Gestapo.

On the basis of these demands, we appeal to all DOE educators, staff, students and parents in New York City to join our committee and to form a rank-and-file safety committee in your school. Our citywide committee is the central organizing group of the independent activity of educators across New York state, New Jersey and Connecticut, and we urge you to get involved!



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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