New York City teachers union pushes for fast return to in-person classes

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24 November 2020

As the number of known COVID-19 infections continues to rise throughout New York City and its surrounding areas, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is demanding a swift resumption of in-person classes in the largest school district of the United States, which abruptly closed schools on November 18 after the seven-day average positivity rate within the city surpassed three percent.

In a letter to parents on Sunday, UFT President Michael Mulgrew claimed, “Thanks to our advocacy, every New York City public school must adhere to a 50-point safety plan… Our work paid off. City schools became among the safest public places in the city thanks to those stringent protocols.”

These are patent lies. In early September, Mulgrew struck a deal with Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to open city schools with in-person classes behind the backs of teachers who overwhelmingly opposed a physical return to unsafe buildings.

Educators were willing to strike to prevent the reopening of school buildings. Instead, the UFT followed the lead of de Blasio and set a date to reopen the buildings, orchestrating a series of fraudulent “safety walks” purportedly to identify and correct problems with ventilation systems and other safety concerns raised by teachers and parents. Once in-person classes started, all pretenses around safety protocols and facilities upgrades were dropped by the UFT, while widespread concerns over antiquated ventilation systems in school buildings remained unaddressed.

As for the safety of city schools amid the pandemic, the infection with COVID-19 of 2,400 New York City public school teachers and students since September belies any such claims. Significantly, these infections have occurred under conditions of mass student absenteeism; only a quarter of public school students have attended in-person classes since the beginning of the academic year.

Indeed, Mulgrew was forced to admit in the very same letter that schools are by no means infection-free oases, writing, “But the recent increase in community transition [sic] in New York City was making inroads into our schools. Just in the past few weeks, the number of New York City school buildings that closed due to multiple unrelated positive cases has doubled.”

As of November 18, when in-person classes were suspended citywide, 126 public school buildings were closed due to multiple, unrelated cases of COVID-19. Many of these buildings are campuses that house multiple schools. Additionally, nearly half of all city schools had been forced to shutter classrooms due to COVID-19 infections.

Despite the disastrous spread of the virus through schools and the rising citywide infection rate, Mulgrew nevertheless declared, “As the conversation now shifts to how to reopen our school buildings safely, we are going to ask the mayor to reconsider a regional approach. We don’t think the whole system has to go remote if large areas of the city have kept transmission rates low.”

The juxtaposition of such comments with continuing reports of the rise in daily infections and hospitalizations in the New York City metropolitan area, as well as the growing alarms sounded by local health officials warning of an imminent rise in deaths due to COVID-19, defies rational thinking.

Whether expressed as a “regional approach,” in the words of Mulgrew, or the “micro-cluster” strategy of New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, the idea that a highly infectious virus can be contained within a given neighborhood of a sprawling metropolis without a general shutdown of all non-essential workplaces and schools is patently absurd.

On Monday, Cuomo announced that the state had added upper Manhattan to the growing number of neighborhoods within New York City identified as

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precautionary “yellow” zones, while the entire borough of Staten Island was designated an “orange” zone. Nassau and Suffolk counties, located just east of New York City, were also designated precautionary yellow zones. In separate comments also on Monday, Mayor de Blasio hinted that all of New York City could be designated an orange zone by as early as next week.

Notwithstanding these events, Cuomo has been the most vocal proponent of herding teachers and students back into school buildings for in-person classes. As school buildings in the city were shuttered amid rising infections last week, Cuomo publicly called into question the criteria being used to determine the suspension of in-person classes.

Just as Mulgrew was adding his voice to the frenzied calls from New York Democrats and their media mouthpieces—with the New York Times in the lead—for a swift return to in-person learning, Mayor de Blasio made public his strategy to promptly reopen school buildings.

In a repeat of the “phased in” approach taken in September, de Blasio announced on Monday that the resumption of in-person classes would begin with special education students from the city’s non-geographic District 75. As in the fall, the Mayor is cynically feigning concern for this group of high needs children, for whom the city has denied adequate resources for decades, in order to pave the way for a system-wide school reopening.

As outlined, de Blasio’s plan would subsequently reintroduce in-person classes for 3K and Pre-K children, elementary grades and finally middle and high school students in successive order. Other prominent city Democrats, such as City Council education committee chair Mark Treyger and Public Advocate Jumaane Williams—who recently announced his candidacy for mayor with the endorsement of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America—have also endorsed this plan.

Despite the overwhelming international evidence that schools are significant vectors in the spread of the virus, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the two main teachers unions in the US, as well as local affiliates like the UFT, have backed the policies of Republicans and Democrats to keep schools open with in-person instruction. These corporatist organizations pursue interests aligned to the capitalists in irreconcilable opposition to those of the rank-and-file teachers they claim to represent.

Since the onset of the pandemic at the beginning of the year, the UFT has conspired with the de Blasio administration to cover up the initial outbreak of infections in schools and downplay the toll the pandemic has had on teachers, students and their families. The union has colluded with Democrats to force teachers back into unsafe buildings in the fall, and even facilitated the massive theft of wages owed to teachers for work done 10 years ago.

Now, in the midst of an unprecedented, global rise in infections, which includes a resurgence in the New York metropolitan area, Mulgrew and the rest of the UFT lackeys are working to once more throw teachers to the wolves.

Educators in New York City must oppose all attempts to reopen schools with in-person classes. As long as COVID-19 continues to spread, educators must fight to secure all resources necessary to safely and effectively carry out remote instruction.

Education workers cannot rely on either the Democrats or the Republicans, or their lackeys in the unions, to protect their interests or lives. Rather, educators must call on the working class as a whole to join the struggle to protect human life and reallocate the wealth of society to meet the needs of the population.

We urge all teachers, education workers, parents and students to join us in the formation and strengthening of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood. These committees must serve as the means for mobilizing the independent strength of the working class, including in a nationwide general strike to immediately end all in-person classes and close nonessential businesses while guaranteeing full income protection for all those affected. All those who wish to take up this struggle should sign up to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.

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