

“There is a war against the people, and we have to unite under a common cause.”

New York City workers condemn mayor’s plan to reopen schools Monday

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Anger is rising among educators and other workers in New York City over the decision of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to reopen schools in the largest school district in the US on Monday. The schools were closed on November 19 because the citywide rolling seven-day average positivity rate among people tested for COVID-19 was above three percent, the cutoff initially agreed to by de Blasio and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). Cases of those infected with the virus have increased nearly 70 percent in the last two weeks.

On November 29, the mayor reneged on the agreement to adhere to the three percent threshold, announcing that primary schools would reopen on December 7. The UFT, without consulting its membership, has supported the mayor’s decision wholeheartedly. As a result, 195,000 students from pre-K to 5th grade are eligible to return to in-person class Monday.

De Blasio made his decision after a ferocious pro-reopening media campaign spearheaded by the *New York Times*, various protests by upper-middle-class parents, and intense behind-the-scenes pressure from New York’s Governor Andrew Cuomo and other Democratic Party politicians, who are as beholden to Wall Street as Trump and the Republicans. Cuomo himself has relaxed requirements for schools to close across New York state in counties with high positivity rates.

Millions of working class New Yorkers understand the danger of opening schools. Only 30 percent of eligible students have returned to in-person class since September, in what amounts to a de facto boycott of face-to-face learning in public schools.

The decision to open schools again, as the positivity rate is rapidly rising across the metropolitan region, the state and the entire country, is a sharp warning that the ruling class is prepared to accept hundreds of thousands more deaths from the virus this winter.

New York City teachers have circulated a petition calling for the closing of schools, which reads in part:

We have been sold out by our Union president without a clear explanation or rationale that makes sense. We believe that closing schools is the only way to keep our teachers and their families safe during this time where people are continuing to gather for the holidays. We are asking that you please take our lives and health into consideration and reopen schools after the holidays when the rates have dropped, and it is safe to do so.

The petition is a sincere cry for a scientifically-based policy, but it is addressed to de Blasio, Cuomo, and UFT President Michael Mulgrew, who are all deaf to the needs of educators, parents, and students. These three officials are enforcing the ruling class policy of “herd immunity,” allowing the pandemic to spread by mandating that workplaces and schools open in order to maintain the flow of profits to the coffers of the financial oligarchy.

Not only does the UFT support reopening, but so do its so-called dissident factions. The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which is associated with the Democratic Party through the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations, has issued no call for job action since de Blasio announced that schools would reopen. Instead, it has focused on implementing a race-based curriculum in New York City public schools.

Its statements and tweets since November 19, MORE has called for a “safe” reopening of schools, in essence no different from any other faction of the Democratic Party. On Sunday, MORE tweeted its complete political prostration before Wall Street, writing, “Monday 12/7: show unity against the unsafe reopening of @NYCSchools by wearing red and encouraging staff to do the same. Share your selfies here and we’ll retweet! Solidarity is an action word.”

In opposition to the betrayal of the UFT, the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee has distributed its

statement opposing the reopening of schools and calling on educators to fight for a comprehensive plan to support parents and the entire working class in a complete lockdown of schools and non-essential workplaces. We are fighting to unite educators, parents and students with the broader working class in New York City and across the US to prepare for general strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and save countless lives.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has spoken to scores of educators and other workers throughout the city and region about their views on the reopening of schools, which will undoubtedly deepen the second wave of the pandemic throughout the region.

Commenting on the UFT collaborating with de Blasio to reopen schools, a postal worker from the Morgan Processing and Distribution Center in Manhattan stated, “The teachers’ union is not on the right side, urging teachers to go back so soon. No teacher should go back on December 7. The teachers should know what is best for them and do it against all odds.

“If the teachers strike or have a sickout, they should be supported by the whole working class. Reopening the schools is what the people in high places want. They want the population knocked down. There is a war against the people, and we have to unite under a common cause. I think everyone should quarantine together again, the right way. We have a little more knowledge about the virus, and this is what works.”

A ninth-grade teacher in New York City who is working at home told the WSWS, “People die from this. I know people that died from corona. I have parents of students that died. I have friends that died. I think I’d be very nervous if I had to be in school. I’d be very anxious.

“I belong to a widows’ group because I happen to be a widow as well. And in the meantime, people in my group, one quarter of them are brand new widows and widowers who lost people to corona. They went into the hospital for one thing and ended up catching corona. A girl that I work with had a baby and went to the gynecologist’s office and got corona. She, thank God, didn’t pass away, but she had a 104° fever with a newborn upstairs, and she’s a teacher.

“I think shutting down and teaching from home is the right thing to do. I think the city should be shut down. Get rid of this and be done. In the summer, we were at one to five people passing away per week from corona. Last week or two weeks ago, we were at 44. You know how many we’re at today? Sixty-six. How many people we lose in a day, how many people are intubated—that’s what gets me.”

One paraprofessional teaching pre-K and kindergarten in New York City said she is nervous about having to resume in-person classes today. “Everybody who has to go back is worried. This week the positivity rate was seven percent, when it was three percent last week. You know in Elmhurst, where my school is, there are a lot of immigrants and it was very high.

They don’t test pre-K and kindergarten [kids].

“We are babysitters for parents who must go back to work. The testing is not really done, not all students are tested. And teachers who need money and are afraid for their jobs keep quiet about cases that were in the school, and administrators, too, want to protect their jobs. There is not unity for teachers to act to keep all the schools closed because the middle and high school teachers are remaining remote.

“My child is remote learning, but I have to go on the bus. There you have all the nurses and the bus driver who are going to work because they feel it is their special duty despite the risk. So even though my child needs special education, he is staying home because the ride is risky.”

A New York City school bus driver who is routed to private schools that have remained open commented on the reopening of the public schools. He stated, “I think Cuomo and de Blasio are murderers. We are running low on hospital beds and COVID-19 has expanded. What are they going to do when people are going straight to the hospitals looking for doctors?”

“I am a school bus driver. If one kid has it, the whole school can have it. I am in the same danger. It is a fallacy that people think it is not going to happen to them, that they won’t die. People have to pay the rent. They have to go to work. I am having to take a big risk. We need collective action because everybody has the same problem.”

The immense opposition of educators and workers in New York City and internationally to the irrational and deadly reopening of schools must be harnessed in new organizations that will strike out a path for the independent action of the working class, unencumbered by the pro-capitalist unions. We urge all city educators, parents and students who wish to take up the fight to close schools and halt the spread of the pandemic to join and help build the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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