

Washington D.C. teachers union reaches agreement with Democratic mayor to reopen schools

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Last Thursday, the Washington D.C. public school system and the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) reached an agreement for the broad reopening of schools in which teachers could be required to return to in-person teaching.

Under a December 17 memorandum of agreement between the WTU and D.C. Public Schools, at the start of the third quarter, which begins in early February, teachers would be required to return to school if parent requests for in-person learning exceed the number of teachers volunteering to return to school buildings.

For months, the WTU has been negotiating the terms for reopening schools with city officials. In October, the union was ready to accede to the city's reopening plans, only to be rebuffed by D.C. teachers who insisted on the ability to reject in-person assignments as part of any agreement.

On November 2, the school system announced it would keep all classes remote indefinitely after a rising number of teacher sickouts threatened to erupt independently of the union in the days leading up to the United States presidential election. With Joe Biden elected, the WTU has completely dropped any pretense of defending teachers against a return to work.

Indeed, the teachers unions, including the WTU, have glowingly endorsed Biden's pick for Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona, a strong advocate for reopening schools and proponent of various schemes to privatize public education. Shortly after the Cardona nomination was announced, the WTU retweeted Biden's statement announcing the pick, along with fawning tweets from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and AFT President Randi Weingarten.

Like her Democratic counterparts around the country,

Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser is pushing for the reopening of schools despite record-setting COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations. Bowser lauded the reopening agreement shortly after it was reached, stating, "We know that the best option for our young people is in-person learning, and that has remained our focus."

She added, "The road ahead is long, and there is much learning loss to be made up for, but this agreement brings us another step closer to getting our students where they need to be—in the classroom, surrounded by educators and friends, feeling challenged and loved."

With breathtaking hypocrisy, on December 18, the day after the agreement was reached, Bowser issued a public health order that all "nonessential" businesses must close, including restaurants with in-person dining, museums and libraries.

In the order Bowser acknowledged the high number of COVID-19 cases in the city, stating, "The daily case rate in the District has increased to 35.22 cases per 100,000 persons, having multiplied nearly eight-fold since early July." The order added that "reducing activity outside of one's home and household is recommended, and dialing back some and eliminating other sources of activity is advisable during a season of increased gathering, celebrating and travel."

Back in November, D.C. Public Schools opened what it called Canvas Academics and Real Engagement ("CARE") classrooms, allowing up to 14,000 students to return to school buildings to receive online instruction while overseen by nonteaching D.C. school employees. The *Washington Post* reports that only about 900 students, spread across roughly 70 buildings,

are enrolled in the CARE program, with attendance between 50-60 percent each day.

Despite this limited participation and contrary to unscientific claims that schools are safe or that children are less able to spread the virus, there have been numerous positive coronavirus cases in schools. Last week, five schools were shut down after multiple students and staff tested positive. Four of the schools only had one classroom in use, with less than 11 students in attendance.

In fact, the District of Columbia's own data lists the top three settings for COVID-19 outbreaks, in order, as "College and university," "Childcare/daycare" and "School building (K-12)." This is consistent with trends across the country and internationally. According to the COVID Monitor web site, which aggregates data from state and school districts, news media and public reports, there have been at least 435,674 infections of students and staff in K-12 schools across the US.

Under last week's agreement reached by the WTU and D.C. Public Schools, cosmetic safety procedures were agreed to, including a "walk-through team" composed of a principal, teacher, parent, custodian, and a school nurse. The agreement is noticeably vague on how members of these teams can contest DCPS claims of school safety or what procedures to follow to correct any noticed defects. Further, none of the designated members have the necessary expertise in occupational safety and health to properly evaluate the safety of school buildings, many of which are decades old and dilapidated.

Further, the agreement makes clear that the school system and not the "walk-through team" will make the decision to close any schools, and if schools "fall out of compliance" with any specific safety measure, the school system alone will provide a plan to "remediate the item(s)" which will "ensure continued operations." In other words, a particular school can remain in operation even if safety measures are not followed, at the sole discretion of the school system.

In announcing the deal, WTU President Elizabeth Davis claimed to be doing all that was "possible to safeguard our communities." She continued, "The safety of our students, school-based staff and communities must remain our top priority." In fact, given the certain outbreaks when school openings

expand with resulting illnesses if not deaths of teachers, the WTU is undermining the safety of its members and the wider community.

The unions, as loyal backers of the capitalist Democratic Party, are facilitating President-elect Biden's plan to broadly reopen the schools within his first 100 days. The bipartisan push to open the schools is a necessary part of the ruling class policy of ensuring the profits of the major corporations by compelling working parents to return to unsafe factories, warehouses, and offices.

In response to Mayor Bowser's endorsement of the agreement, one D.C. teacher tweeted, "We are literally one month away from vaccine for our teachers. Can't we wait to reopen until teachers are vaccinated and safety is ensured? Wasting 11 months of quarantine when we are just one month away. This doesn't make logical sense."

A Washington D.C. parent responded also on Twitter. "You just had to shut down 5 schools this week and you're still fudging the numbers. Rushing schools open to make a point is putting our kids and community at risk."

Teachers, students, and parents in the Washington D.C. region who want to fight back against the deadly drive to reopen schools must unequivocally break from the unions and the union-backed Democratic Party, which are both trying to drive teachers back into schools as the pandemic reaches its deadliest stage to date.

Instead, the *World Socialist Web Site* Educators Newsletter calls on teachers, students and parents to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the only organization fighting to unify teachers, students and parents nationwide against school openings and for the full funding of remote learning. Since the launch of this network of safety committees in mid-August, numerous state and local committees have been formed across the country. We encourage you to sign up today to begin setting up a committee in your area at wsws.org/edsafety.



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