

Hundreds of Arizona teachers stage sickouts to prevent in-person learning as cases skyrocket

Renae Cassimeda
5 January 2021

At least 750 Phoenix-area teachers are expected to participate in sickouts Tuesday in opposition to schools reopening to in-person instruction this week amid record surges in COVID-19 cases throughout the state. The sickouts were organized by teachers across two districts in Maricopa County, with as many as 150 teachers in the Gilbert Public Schools (GPS) and 600 teachers in the Chandler Unified School District (CUSD) expected to participate.

On Monday evening, over 100 teachers, staff and community members protested outside district board offices in the county while both districts held emergency board meetings regarding their reopening plans. Officials in both districts have been insisting that teachers and students return to in-person classes this week following the winter break and, in fact, had prepared for the sickouts by relying on substitutes, deans and assistant principals to cover classes.

The protest outside the Monday night school board meeting in Chandler caused the district to change plans and vote to keep students learning remotely while teachers give their lessons from campus until January 19. In Gilbert, a marathon six-hour board meeting left the district in nearly the same place it was when the meeting started. Schools will be opening on Tuesday as planned for in-person learning, under a hybrid model. Teachers in both districts are still expected to be on campuses Tuesday, so it is likely that most teachers will continue with their sickout.

Arizona's health systems are strained to the brink as the state's per capita seven-day rolling average of new cases ranks highest in the nation with 121.8 cases per 100,000. Hospitals report they are on the verge of implementing Crisis Standards of Care, meaning health care workers will have to begin rationing care.

All 15 counties in Arizona have test positivity rates well above 10 percent, with Maricopa County as the hotspot, seeing the highest number of cases and deaths with over 5,000 new cases reported Monday. According to the state's COVID-19 dashboard, there are only 131 ICU beds left in the state, which has filled 93 percent of all ICU beds. Over the weekend, hospitals in major cities had to turn away ambulances and send patients to other health systems. In addition to a lack of beds and staffing, some hospitals report not even having enough clean sheets.

Given the catastrophic conditions throughout the state, Arizona Public Health and Services (APHS) officials have recommended

that schools in all counties move to 100 percent virtual instruction. The APHS states that county-specific public health benchmarks should fall in the "moderate" or "minimal" category for two weeks before schools should be allowed to open to hybrid or full face-to-face instruction.

Yesterday, Arizona's state Superintendent Kathy Hoffman issued a series of tweets calling for Arizona's Republican Governor Doug Ducey to order all schools to remain in distance learning for a mere two weeks.

In response, C.J. Karamargin, a spokesperson for Ducey's office, said the governor "will not be considering this request. ... This is a local decision, the online option is already available, and the governor has repeatedly made his preference clear: Kids have already lost out on a lot of learning, and he wants schools opened, safely."

In reality, it will not matter if schools open for in-person instruction January 5 or January 15, either date will result in a new wave of cases that will send the case rates and death toll skyrocketing to new heights. Governor Ducey has been a major proponent of the homicidal policy of reopening schools throughout the state. During the summer he issued a plan that would incentivize school districts to reopen based on funding. Districts that reopened fully would receive 100 percent funding, whereas those that opted for hybrid or fully virtual would receive 10-20 percent less funding, prying open the doors particularly for poor and cash-starved schools.

While Hoffman and Ducey volley in the media over a two-week difference, teachers and the working class as a whole must be warned that this is a political stunt by representatives of the ruling class that agree on reopening regardless of the consequences. What is true in Arizona is also true next door, where California's Democratic Governor Newsom is also dangling \$2 billion in funding over impoverished schools to reopen by February when all projections show hospitals will continue to be overwhelmed.

Since the onset of the pandemic, there have been over 900 COVID-19 cases and at least two deaths reported throughout schools in GPS and CUSD. One teacher in CUSD expressed concern over schools reopening, noting, "Health Department in the red. Hospitals are at capacity. We've had at least 2 employees die and at least 2 parents (that was made public) die from COVID-19. What else will it take for the board and district to see sense and go

virtual until it's safe?! At the bare minimum, be virtual for the first 2 weeks to allow numbers to get a little better!! I have a friend/colleague whose husband now has it, he was one of the most vulnerable. She's expected to be at work next week. Insanity!"

Recently, the Chandler Education Association (CEA) surveyed 1,200 teachers and found that 65 percent did not feel comfortable returning to work on January 5. Additionally, 70 percent of those polled said they would feel more comfortable if schools could revert to online instruction for the first two weeks of the year, officials said. Responding to the majority of opposition among teachers in the district, the CEA has announced its support for the sickout by teachers in Chandler but seeks to stifle the opposition by mimicking the call by Hoffman for a two-week delay in reopening.

Meanwhile, the Gilbert Education Association (GEA) has made clear it will not support the sickout by Gilbert educators. The GEA issued a proposal to the board which states, "GEA has not promoted a sickout. ... We do acknowledge and support the concerns of these members and teachers and believe constructive discourse is the best action to work together for all stakeholders."

In addition to calling for virtual learning until benchmarks are met in the district, Gilbert teachers are also calling for accurate COVID-19 data in the schools. In an open letter to the district, teachers and staff argued that "the only way to determine the percentage of active cases on any campus is to implement regular mandatory testing of all students and staff." At present, data collection in the district is done on a voluntary basis.

The WSWs spoke with a teacher in Gilbert who expressed concerns over the district's reporting of data. "Schools are running their own dashboards. They say they are reporting all confirmed cases within the district, but multiple letters go out to parents regarding exposure, and it does not match up with the numbers reported on the dashboard. Exactly how and when the district receives and reports information is not transparent. My husband [also a teacher in the district] has a colleague who was on campus and had COVID, but there was never a letter sent out to parents about her, and her case was not recorded."

She added, "We are held responsible for all the ills of society. It's on us to do everything with limited resources. OK, great, make schools the center of the community, but give us counselors and nurses and psychologists; make our classrooms no more than 25 students if they are in high school; and give everyone equal access to funding and technology. Teachers can't do it all."

"We have been begging the district to go virtual. We are calling in sick because we actually don't feel safe at work, not because we don't want to be there."

Teachers must be warned that they are being set up. The entire trade union apparatus is working directly with the highest levels of state and local officials to continue the reopening policies of which the schools are the linchpin. A false narrative is being spun in which the CEA is portrayed as a more militant union, while the GEA is portrayed as a "weak union." In reality, the teachers unions across the US and internationally have both allowed and assisted with school reopenings, ranging from full reopening plans to the equally dangerous hybrid and part-time models.

The CEA is openly calling for a mere two-week delay and has run a survey asking if educators support a two-week delay. Neither the CEA nor any other union has asked teachers if they support full lockdowns, the provision of billions in education funding, financial support for families to stay home, online resources for students and teachers, and a guarantee to remain closed until the virus is under control. This is because the entire trade union apparatus is tied to the financial elite and is dedicated to suppressing the struggle of teachers and keeping them from uniting.

Genuine opposition to the homicidal policies of the ruling elite must be directed toward building independent organizations which workers themselves control, in order to fight back against the deadly reopening of schools. As the pandemic continues to rip through communities and claim lives in record numbers, workers in Arizona, across the US and around the world must fight for their safety by forming neighborhood and workplace rank-and-file safety committees, to coordinate a unified struggle of the entire working class against the capitalist system and the herd immunity policies of the ruling class.

Educator Rank-and-File Safety Committees have formed across the US and are calling for a nationwide general strike to demand the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools, as well as all nonessential businesses, to contain the pandemic and save lives. Full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction, and full income protection to all parents and caregivers to stay home must be paid for by expropriating the wealth of the pandemic profiteers, who amassed roughly \$1.8 trillion in 2020 alone.

All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should join our Facebook page and contact us today to establish local rank-and-file committees in your school and neighborhood. We will be hosting a national call-in meeting at 1pm EST this Saturday, January 9, to discuss the developments in Arizona, across the US and internationally, and advance a fighting strategy for educators and the working class as a whole. We urge you to send us your contact information today and make plans to attend this important meeting.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact