

School districts across the US push to reopen as COVID-19 infections and death soar

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The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a national online meeting at 1 p.m. EST this Saturday, January 9, titled, “Stop in-person learning until the pandemic is contained!” We urge all educators, parents, students and workers who wish to join the struggle to close schools and nonessential businesses to register today and invite your coworkers and friends.

On Wednesday, the United States had its deadliest day yet in the COVID-19 pandemic, with 4,100 perishing from the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned that the total death toll may exceed 430,000 by the end of January. A new strain of the virus, known as B.1.1.7, which first emerged in Britain and is 50-70 percent more transmissible, has now been documented in five states: California, New York, Florida, Georgia and Colorado. With no nationwide plan to track the strain, it is likely already far more widespread.

With this catastrophe overwhelming health systems across the country, state and local governments led by both Democrats and Republican continue to ride roughshod over the opposition of educators and parents to the unsafe reopening of school buildings.

This homicidal policy has already resulted in at least 435,674 cases in K-12 schools, according to the COVID Monitor. Hundreds of educators have died from COVID-19, and the death toll among children is growing.

The ruling class and its political representatives in the two capitalist parties have allowed the pandemic to spread uncontrolled, and have facilitated a vast growth of social inequality, in which millions have been made unemployed and face hunger and eviction while the billionaires have amassed unthinkable profits during the same period. The fascist coup attempted Wednesday and the bipartisan drive to reopen schools are both aimed at forcing workers to accept mass death while the pandemic profiteers enrich themselves.

President-elect Joe Biden has rejected a national lockdown and declared that one of his priorities is to have most students in the classroom within 100 days of taking office, despite the fact that the pandemic will be far worse in coming months. Democrat-led school districts across the country are already working to put this into practice because getting children back to school is necessary to get workers back into the factories and other workplaces to produce corporate profit.

Chicago

On Monday, thousands of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers were required to return to school buildings to prepare for students’ return to classrooms next week. According to CPS officials, half of the teachers were absent but logged into work from their homes. In response, CPS Superintendent Janice Jackson sent a threatening email to teachers warning they would face “progressive disciplinary action” if they did not

return.

Jackson claimed that the mass absences were the result of pressure from the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). In fact, the CTU has been working diligently to come to an agreement with the district to place teachers back in the classrooms.

The proposed “solutions” advanced by CTU President Jesse Sharkey are half-measures that do not address the health risks posed to staff and students. These include a delayed start of classes until teachers receive a first dose of the vaccine, an extension of the school year into the summer, the return of only those teachers and students who volunteer to do in-person learning, and mass testing of all teachers and students.

The idea that teachers are protected by a half dose of the vaccine is concocted pseudoscience. Dr. Paul Offit, an infectious disease specialist and member of the FDA’s Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, told CNN, “There’s no data on efficacy of a half dose. If you use a half dose, you’re just making it up.”

Other districts like Salt Lake City have used the promise to vaccinate teachers as a ploy to resume in-person instruction only to say that the disastrous rollout of the vaccines has delayed inoculations.

The CTU leadership has blocked any coordinated action by teachers throughout the city or across state lines. While making some noises about a possible strike, Sharkey plainly said, “We are seeking to negotiate a settlement.” While teachers were being herded back to schools, CTU Area Vice President Sarah Chambers boasted on social media of her poolside vacation to Puerto Rico, an area similarly devastated by the pandemic. Facing immense ire by the city’s rank and file, she has since had to “step back” from the executive board.

New York City

In New York City, the largest school district in the country, a similar collaboration between the local Democrats and the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), is keeping schools open while the virus spreads uncontrolled and the new B.1.1.7 strain has been detected in the state.

Demonstrating the fraudulent character of the whole reopening, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo recently discarded the state’s previously established metric of when a district can open—a less than nine percent test positivity rate—just as New York City is poised to surpass this threshold and as the pandemic breaks statewide records for new daily cases.

Cuomo’s new standard, that districts may stay open as long as their internal positivity rate is lower than the city as a whole, is completely unscientific and makes it virtually impossible to force a closure. Furthermore, the mandatory quarantine for exposed persons has been

reduced from 14 to 10 days.

Despite New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's absurd claim that "schools are the safest place to be in New York City," since schools reopened in September there have been 3,900 temporary classroom closures and 600 two-week shutdowns of entire schools, according to *Chalkbeat*.

Exposing the union's complicity, UFT President Michael Mulgrew wrote in the *Daily News* that the school reopenings had been "successful" because of the "cautious approach and rigorous standards."

California

Governor Gavin Newsom of California recently announced \$2 billion in funds to incentivize districts to open as quickly as possible, offering \$450 per student to those that reopen. Without any scientific explanation, the order also relaxes the case rate at which districts are allowed to reopen, from an average of seven daily new cases per 100,000 to 28 per 100,000.

This loosening of public health restrictions comes as the virus is devastating the health care system in California. Los Angeles currently has zero percent ICU capacity, and ambulance workers have been instructed not to deliver patients with little chance of survival. Hospitals are also seeing an increase in younger COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care.

In response to Newsom's order, the superintendents of the state's seven largest school districts wrote a letter criticizing him from the right. Rather than following local cases and positivity rates, they prefer for him to set a single standard for the state that would *require* in-person instruction to begin everywhere once this threshold is met. The signatories of the letter are representatives of the financial elite, including Los Angeles superintendent Austin Beutner, a billionaire investment banker and former publisher and CEO of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Tennessee

A report by the Tennessee Education Association estimates that a staggering 16,000 teachers in the state have contracted COVID-19, while at least eight have died. According to *Chalkbeat*, the figure was derived from "a representative sample of six large and medium-size school systems that offered in-person instruction and regularly published their case counts."

The analysis suggests that people teaching in classrooms have "significantly higher infection rates than the general population and in the communities they serve." This last point is corroborated by data coming out of the UK, which found that school staff were infected at a rate over 300 percent of that of the local population as a whole.

Oregon

In Oregon, Democratic Governor Kate Brown recently issued a directive to the Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority to begin initiatives to get more students back into classrooms, including reducing guidelines on reopening schools from "mandatory" to "recommended."

Teachers, parents and community members protested outside various district offices in the state, putting up 500 flags to symbolize the educators and children who have died from the virus in the past year. Though there is no state or national governmental database to track workplace COVID-19 deaths, various independent websites have attempted to document educator deaths.

Arizona

Hundreds of Phoenix-area teachers, parents and community members protested Monday in response to plans for in-person instruction to resume Tuesday in the Gilbert Public School and Chandler Unified School Districts. Both districts held emergency board meetings to decide on their reopening plans, with each voting to delay by a mere week or two. Notably, Gilbert's Superintendent was absent Monday due to having tested positive for COVID-19. Arizona currently has the highest per capita seven-day rolling average of new cases in the country.

In the campaign to reopen schools, the teachers unions have dutifully collaborated with the Democratic and Republican parties. In the same manner, they are playing a pivotal role in downplaying the dangers posed by the Trump administration and Wednesday's fascist coup attempt. At the same time, the unions are promoting Biden, who will be committed to a brutal program of austerity to pay off the multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street.

In order to halt and reverse the reopening of schools, to defeat Trump and the rise of fascism, and to develop a program that addresses the interests and needs of the working class, educators must create democratic rank-and-file committees that are independent of both parties and their lackeys in the corrupt unions.

To learn more about this perspective and how to form such committees in your district or state, we urge readers to attend the next national meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Saturday. Register today at wsws.org/edsafety and invite your friends and coworkers to participate!



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact