

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in US holds first national meeting of 2021

Matthew MacEgan
11 January 2021

On Saturday, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held its first national meeting of 2021 under the banner: “Stop in-person learning until the pandemic is contained!” The meeting, which was attended by more than 150 participants across the US and around the globe, involved educators from Alabama, Alaska, California, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania and many other states, along with nurses, autoworkers and Amazon workers.

The meeting was chaired by David Brown, a special education teacher who works in Oakland, California, and the opening report was given by Evan Blake, a former special education teacher, who placed the struggle of educators within the context of the unfolding political crisis in Washington D.C.

According to Blake, US President Donald Trump’s fascist coup of January 6 “is deeply connected to the reopening of schools and the broader policies pursued by the ruling class during the pandemic.” If Trump’s coup had been a success—and there is still time for him to launch more provocations before Inauguration Day—he would have established a presidential dictatorship and utilized the military and police to impose a reign of terror over the working class.

Blake insisted that workers, including educators, must take up the demand for the immediate removal and arrest of Trump and an open and public criminal investigation into all those who aided and abetted the fascistic putsch of January 6.

“Biden did the exact opposite of what any genuine political leader facing a coup d’état would do: he encouraged Trump—the coup-plotter in chief—to speak in front of tens of millions on national television. On Friday, Biden explicitly rejected calls to impeach Trump and instead appealed for ‘unity’ with his ‘Republican colleagues.’”

The same processes that led to the events of January 6 have also conditioned the general response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the criminal policy of “herd immunity” and the bipartisan campaign to send teachers and students back to school. From the beginning, the corporate and political establishment was concerned with saving profits, not lives.

Blake shared a graph with meeting attendees that compared changes in the Dow Jones Industrial Average in 2020 with US COVID-19 deaths. The result was a striking visual that showed share values skyrocketing along with what should have been preventable deaths beginning in the month of March.

The fight against the pandemic and the danger of fascism, Blake concluded, depended entirely on the independent initiative of the working class, including the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize educators and broader sections of workers against both big-business parties and the profit system they defend.

Blake’s opening report was followed by a presentation from Dr. Benjamin Mateus, who has written extensively on the medical side of the pandemic for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Mateus explained that there

are currently 90 million documented COVID-19 infections across the globe, a little more than one percent of the world’s population.

To date, there have already been two million deaths resulting primarily from COVID-19, so it is safe to speculate that a jump to 10 percent of the global population becoming infected would result in approximately 20 million deaths. “This is tragic in that it is not only foreseeable but also preventable,” Mateus noted.

Mateus shared slides that highlighted areas in the United States where the largest school districts are located: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago—all areas where there was a push by local governments to reopen schools. This reopening raised both the number of hospitalizations and the number of deaths due to COVID-19 in those areas.

Statistics emerging from these areas were then contrasted with a study of 41 countries, including the US, where infections had been sharply reduced when schools, universities and nonessential businesses were temporarily closed in the late winter and spring last year. “This is critical,” Mateus insisted. “When you employ these measures, we see that the reproduction rate is reduced. These mitigation measures should be put into place now to get the virus to stop spreading and to bring about a decline in its reproduction.”

The slides from Dr. Mateus’ report are available [here](#).

Following these reports, the floor was opened for attendees to ask questions and make comments on the situation facing educators. Several members and supporters of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee made contributions, updating the national group on matters in their respective states.

Tony Jackson spoke on behalf of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, exposing the Texas state government and the largest teachers’ unions, “who betrayed the interests of their dues-paying members in service of the capitalist drive to keep the economy open at the expense of teachers’ lives.”

Jackson explained that both Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton have worked together through legal challenges to prevent local health authorities and municipalities from preventatively closing or limiting hours for schools, businesses and other public spaces to curb the spread of COVID-19.

“Most recently,” Jackson related, “El Paso Judge Ricardo Samaniego’s efforts to place curfews on bars and restaurants were overturned by [Paxton] intervening as plaintiff on behalf of nine El Paso restaurants, bars, gyms and other businesses. These businesses are owned by three individuals and hospitality groups that have received millions of taxpayer dollars.”

Jackson insisted that the campaign to keep businesses open is inextricably tied to the compulsion to force teachers into unsafe and deadly workplaces.

Also speaking from Texas was Michael Hull, the founder of the Facebook group “Teachers Against Dying,” who said it was necessary to “get the fiction out of teachers’ minds” that the unions or the Democrats

were going to fight for them. He pointed to the role of the unions in isolating and betraying the wave of teacher strikes in 2018-19 and Biden's choice for education secretary, Miguel Cardona, an advocate for the rapid reopening of schools. Instead, he said, teachers had to "band together and understand that power is in the numbers."

In her comments, a nurse from Los Angeles County gave a chilling account of the conditions in the hospitals being overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases. "Even before the pandemic," she said, "many of the hospitals were understaffed, there was a lack of supplies and there were many times where we didn't have enough PPE. So, we were already set up to fail and with a pandemic now we're seeing the consequences," she said, with hospitals rationing oxygen, triaging patients and deciding who will be treated and who will not, and telling EMTs not to bring patients to the hospital if they cannot revive them. To make matters worse, she said, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom had caved in to the powerful hospital corporation lobby by overriding the state's limits on patient-to-nurse ratios.

These dire conditions, she said, are "all due to our for-profit system. The hospitals were given a bailout. That money could have been used to build more hospitals. We knew nine months ago this was going to happen, and they did nothing to prepare. China was able to build a hospital in a few weeks. We could have done that," she said, adding that the bailout money was used instead to provide payouts to CEOs and shareholders.

Denouncing Newsom's plans to send children and teachers back into schools, she concluded, "I am asking workers to unite. I am appealing to everyone on this call to take up the struggle and help build rank-and-file committees. Wherever you are in the nation and all over the world, we need to unite, to bring our power collectively to stop this."

In addition to several other comments and questions asked during the course of the meeting, Tania Kent gave a report on the situation in the United Kingdom, explaining that the conditions in the United States are almost identical to those confronted by educators throughout the world. "The United Kingdom," Kent stated, "the first country in the world to opt for herd immunity, has now got the highest death rates per capita in the world."

Kent expressed what the Educators Rank-and-File Committee insists should serve as a basis for forming statewide committees in every US state: "The ruling elites have prepared for millions to die from a virus that was entirely preventable and controllable. Hundreds of millions more will die due to the consequences of the social impact of this virus. We are calling for action to mobilize the immense strength and social power of educators to close schools on a unified program with broader sections of workers. This must be part of an international offensive of the working class to begin the fight for its own interests."

Phyllis Steele, one of the founding members of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, gave attendees a summary of the struggles endured by educators in her state. Steele related that Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer stated at a press conference last week that all schools will be entirely opened by March 1.

"To ensure this return to buildings, Michigan has deemed K-12 teachers some of the first in line to get the COVID vaccine. This decision, make no mistake about it, is being made by the Detroit Three automakers, the banks, and the other movers and shakers in the state. They want our students' parents back in plants at Fiat Chrysler, Ford and GM, as well as those of the myriad suppliers and other major corporations."

The Michigan committee's demands, she said, "consider the human toll that this pandemic continues to have. We must first of all protect life. Workers need to stay home until it is safe to reopen schools. We must also demand full and free social and emotional well-being resources to be provided to children and families," she said, and "full compensation to workers so they can stay at home."

Also speaking was an Amazon worker from Baltimore and member of

Amazon BWI2 Rank-and-File Safety Committee, who said conditions at the giant corporation throughout the country and the world had shown "essentially it's all about capitalism. "We are being encouraged to show up, no matter how many cases of COVID there are, and to work with or without PPE. It's very important that we all bind together, industry by industry, as rank-and-files and find a way to unite internationally. It doesn't matter what industry you are part of or what state or country you live in. We have to have a voice. That is the only way we can really fight against this."

Matthew, a university instructor and single parent of two children in the Florida public school system, made a statement about the latest COVID-19 statistics in his state, including the fact that the latest tests were returning with a 40 percent positivity rate. "There were nearly 20,000 new cases and 194 new deaths reported today alone in Florida."

He went on to provide details to meeting attendees about the state attack on Rebekah Jones, the GIS data specialist and whistleblower who was fired by the Florida Department of Health for refusing to manipulate data to allow Republican Governor Ron DeSantis to better justify the reopening of Florida for commerce.

On December 7, Jones' home was raided by state police, who pointed guns at her and her family, including her children, before seizing her phone, computers and flash drives that contained proof that Florida officials were lying about internal reports and notices from the CDC.

Matthew concluded by making an appeal to attendees in Florida to join and build a statewide rank-and-file safety committee. "The defense of Jones, of science, and of life will not come from either of the twin parties of Wall Street. If an opposition is to be mounted, it must come from the working class, independently organized on the basis of its own interest."

Summing up the meeting, Joe Kishore, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, said, the US "had proven more than any other society incapable of responding to the pandemic in a rational, scientific and humane way." Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Tesla's Elon Musk and other billionaires enriched themselves, while 380,000 people died of COVID.

The media and the Democrats were seeking to conceal the fact that Trump's attempted coup was connected to a much broader policy of the ruling elite, Kishore said, pointing to the initial demonstrations by far right-wing groups last April in Michigan and other states demanding that there be no restraints on the spread of the virus. Trump sought to cultivate far right forces to spearhead the demand for a return to work and school, and the herd immunity policy, Kishore said. After the bipartisan bailout of the banks, this became the policy of the ruling class and both parties.

The Democrats, he said, "are terrified above all by the growth of social opposition in the working class that would develop into a movement against capitalism and the whole policy of the ruling class, particularly in response to the pandemic." That is why the defense of lives, he said, is bound up with a fight to expose Trump's conspiracy and what was behind it. The SEP, he said, was calling for a public investigation to expose the conspiracy, and this would be connected to the development of opposition in the working class to the policy of the ruling elite that has produced so much death and devastation. "The working class has to intervene in this crisis and assert its own interests. That is why I am urging all those on this call to join and build rank-and-file committees and to join the Socialist Equality Party to take up the fight for socialism."

We urge all educators, parents, students and workers who wish to join the struggle to close schools and nonessential businesses to contact us at wsws.org/edsafety and join our Facebook group. We also urge you to make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact