

# Biden's top economic advisor demands that "schools open" so parents "can get back to work"

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At the Reuters Next conference on Wednesday, Brian Deese, the incoming director of Biden's National Economic Council, bluntly stated the class interests behind the ongoing drive to reopen schools. "We need to get the schools open," Deese claimed, "so that parents, and particularly women, who are being disproportionately hurt in this economy, can get back to work."

Notwithstanding his feigned concern for the plight of working-class parents, Deese, a former investment banker for the Wall Street firm BlackRock, blurted out what has always been the chief concern of the corporate and financial oligarchy: getting children back to schools, no matter how dangerous, so their parents can resume producing corporate profits. Deese only reiterated the position of the incoming Biden administration, which has declared in its platform that opening schools is "perhaps the single most important step to get parents back to work."

Such efforts will only spur the pandemic to ever greater heights of death. Already in the US, there are now an average of more than 3,400 newly reported deaths each day, along with more than 250,000 new confirmed cases of the coronavirus.

And schools are key drivers of the pandemic. A recent study in Montreal showed that, contrary to the official government position, children were in fact driving community spread. As many educators suspected, when schools reopened in the fall, children caught and passed on the virus to their peers, who in turn passed it along to their parents and other adults they interacted with.

"The objective right now should be to flatten the curve," said Simona Bignami, one of the authors of the

research, to the *Montreal Gazette*. "Yet opening schools will strongly limit, if not outright cancel, the benefits the other measures in effect could have."

School reopenings have been the goal of both the Democrats and Republicans when schools and factories were first closed in March and April. Then, the lockdowns that took place were precipitated by the opposition of New York City teachers and wildcat strikes by autoworkers, meatpackers and other sections of workers. The school closures were forcibly and prematurely ended at the time by Trump and in-person instruction has been restarted by Democrats in major urban areas such as New York City and Chicago.

For months and months, Democratic and Republican politicians and columnists in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have claimed that their only motivation for reopening schools in the midst of the pandemic was to help children, "especially low-income students and students of color" from "falling behind," along with feigned concerns about mental health and child abuse. Similar arguments were made in the United Kingdom, Germany and other countries to conceal the class interests behind the homicidal "herd immunity" policy being pursued by capitalist politicians in every country.

Now that Biden is slated to take office, those pretenses are increasingly being dropped. It is not insignificant that the true reasons were blurted out by Deese considering his background. Until his appointment he was the Global Head of Sustainable Investment at BlackRock, a company which controls \$7 trillion in shares and other assets of major banks and corporations such as Deutsche Bank, Wells Fargo, Apple and Microsoft. Deese speaks both for the US

political establishment and directly for the country's financial oligarchy when he demands that "schools open."

Large corporations have been trying to get parents back to work to end the high levels of absenteeism seen during the past several months. A recent article in *Bloomberg* noted that more than 1.9 million people missed work in December from illness, nearly equal the number in April, the height of the first wave of the pandemic. Absenteeism rates have reached as high as 25 percent, which has both reduced revenue for companies as well as forced them to offer higher starting wages to entice those who aren't working back to factory lines.

According to the Federal Reserve Beige Book released Wednesday, the Chicago district of the US central bank reported elevated employee absenteeism among employees because of COVID-19 cases or exposures and child care challenges for workers.

This is what is behind the drive by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot's drive to restart in-person instruction in the nation's third largest school district even as Cook County experiences 6,500 new infections each day and several schools already open have seen outbreaks.

Last week, Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa related a recent meeting between the Latino Caucus of the City Council and the mayor, who admitted what her real priorities were. "The Latino caucus met with Mayor Lori Lightfoot some weeks ago, maybe a few months ago. We said mayor, why do you want to do this? She said, one, I'm hearing from employers that they want their employees back in the workplace, two, I'm hearing from downtown businesses that they don't have any customers and three, because I'm worried about the kids."

If there was truly any concern about whether or not workers should have to choose between their livelihoods and their lives, resources would be made available to subsidize workers' income, not force them back into disease-infected offices and factories. Last November, Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of Biden's COVID-19 task force, called for a nationwide shutdown of nonessential production, with full compensation for lost wages. After the markets plunged, Biden reiterated his opposition to lockdowns and Osterholm has been virtually silent since.

While Deese claimed that reopening the schools

would be part of a broader strategy to get "the investments necessary to make a nationwide vaccination program work," he explicitly noted that such a program would be dependent on resources made available. The talk about opening "safely" even as infections and deaths continue to surge is only a means of giving the teachers unions a cover as they work with Biden and the Democrats to restart schools.

As early as last April, Trump encouraged the most right-wing forces to oppose the most elemental restrictions on business operations, encouraging them to "liberate" states like Michigan from temporary lockdowns. The armed siege of the Michigan Capitol in Lansing and the plot to kidnap and assassinate Governor Gretchen Whitmer was the dress rehearsal for the January 6 fascist insurrection at the US Capitol.

Instead of raising the alarm of the dangers of fascist dictatorship, Biden is doing everything he can to downplay the immense dangers while he calls for bipartisan "unity" with the Republican conspirators. The Democrats do not want to alert workers because they fear that opposition to the right-wing conspiracy will combine with resistance to the deadly back-to-school and back-to-work campaign, which the Democrats, as a party of Wall Street, are pushing just like the Republicans.

But this is exactly what must happen: workers must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to conduct a counteroffensive to the criminal policies of the ruling class, including a political general strike against the fascist danger and to demand the closure of schools and nonessential production until the pandemic is contained. The trillions spent on the corporate bailout must be redirected for a vast infusion of resources for online learning, compensation for those unable to work as a result of the pandemic and for a mass vaccination program to ensure the safety of everyone during the ongoing pandemic.



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