

School nurses return to campuses as United Teachers Los Angeles covers for Democrats

Tadakatsu Apek
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On January 11, compelled by the agreement drawn by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), school nurses began returning to campuses in the world epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. The union-backed agreement is an initial move towards resuming in-person instruction in the nation's second largest school district, even as the pandemic rages out of control and deaths mount.

Over the past week, Los Angeles County has reported an additional 105,716 new cases. That is an average of 15,102 new cases per day and 232 average daily deaths. The county is now home to 959,156 reported cases, or 1,047 infected per 100,000 residents. Intensive care unit (ICU) capacity is at zero, forcing hospitals to accommodate critically ill patients in areas not equipped to support intensive care. Angelenos count for 40 percent of COVID-19 deaths in California, despite making up only 25 percent of the state's population.

The UTLA's deal does not require the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to provide N95 respirators, goggles, or disposable gowns to nurses working at reopened schools. According to the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), 72 percent of nurses lack N95s, 77 percent lack isolation rooms for infectious students, 75 percent lack disposable gowns, 80 percent lack any sort of face shield, partial or full, 67 percent lack goggles, and 22 percent lack basic surgical masks. School nurses have been encouraged to obtain this life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE) from charitable organizations. The UTLA's socially criminal deal with the district also does nothing to remediate the critical shortage of school nurses. Barely 450 nurses serve the LAUSD's 650,000 students, a ratio of 1 nurse to 1,444 students.

"The most recent data from our testing program is alarming," LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner admitted to the *Los Angeles Times*. "Over the past week, five percent of adults—who did not report any exposure or symptoms—tested positive, and close to 10 percent of children. Think about that—1 in 10 children being tested at schools show no symptoms but have the virus." A study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* demonstrated that children and youth under the age of 22 had significantly higher viral loads in the airways than adults, with some children presenting higher viral loads before symptoms appeared.

Notwithstanding its calls for supposedly "safe schools," the UTLA has colluded with the Democrats' criminal drive to reopen the schools throughout the pandemic. The UTLA mounted no opposition to the in-person instruction waivers granted to schools in late September, when the county saw over 264,400 positive cases, including 24,300 children, and a test positivity rate of 9 percent. The waivers were rescinded after the deluge of COVID-19 cases around Thanksgiving.

California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's plan to reopen

schools throughout the state, the so-called "Safe Schools for All" program, quadruples the school reopening threshold from 7 positive cases per 100,000 to 28 per 100,000. It also coerces cash-strapped school districts, which have a combined \$23 billion deficit over the coming year, to reopen by February 1 if they want any share of the one-time \$2 billion pittance Newsom has dangled in front of the state's 1,000 school districts. Over 300,000 children in California lack health insurance, and the mandatory COVID-19 tests for these children will have to be paid for by the school districts themselves. Districts will also likely have to foot the bill for testing children who have health insurance but do not present any symptoms of COVID-19, because most insurance plans refuse to cover asymptomatic testing.

The governor's homicidal plan, in addition to browbeating poor schools into herding educators and students back into unsafe classrooms, completely denies extra funding to school districts in areas where the test positivity rate exceeds 28 per 100,000, the very communities hardest hit by the double blows of plague and poverty. As of this writing, Los Angeles County has a daily positivity rate of 151 per 100,000. 1 in 3 children in the lowest-income communities in the district test positive, compared to 1 in 25 children from more affluent areas. More than 80 percent of the LAUSD's 650,000 students live under the official poverty threshold, and 75 percent of families in the county have lost work due to the pandemic. California has the highest cost of living in the nation second only to Hawaii, and Los Angeles County has the second highest cost of living in the state, just under San Francisco County.

What has been the UTLA's opposition to this?

Nothing. In fact, worse than nothing, the UTLA has collaborated all down the line with Newsom, Mayor Eric Garcetti and LAUSD Superintendent Beutner.

The union hailed Newsom's proposed budget as a "critical step forward" and lauded LA County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer's toothless "recommendations" for schools to remain closed in the month of January. This is no concession to teachers and parents since not a single school in the "purple tier" county, the highest of four risk levels in California, can reopen under the state's own rules.

Newsom's proposal has received laudatory comments from the leading bureaucrats of other educators' unions throughout the state. E. Toby Boyds, the president of the California Teachers Association (CTA), affiliated via merger with the UTLA, wrote, "We appreciate the governor finally recognizing what CTA, for months, has been advocating for..."

Jeff Freitas, president of the California Federation of Teachers, also affiliated via merger with the UTLA, wrote, "With this plan as a starting point, the CFT looks forward to working to ensure that

schools reopen for in-person instruction...”

Despite the cynical expressions of concern for students and parents struggling with inadequately resourced and chaotically implemented remote learning, the bipartisan drive to reopen the schools is aimed at forcing parents back to work to produce the profits needed to pay for the massive bailout of corporate America.

No less than their Republican counterparts, the Democrats, with the full support of the trade unions, have repudiated any serious effort to contain the pandemic. The previous world epicenter of the pandemic, New York City, is dominated by the Democratic Party, which pushed through in November school reopenings for the new year in wide opposition to educators and students’ families. New daily confirmed cases in the nation’s largest school district have increased from 3,690 at the end of 2020 to 4,246 in the first two weeks of 2021. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has colluded with Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to suppress popular opposition.

This week marks the two-year anniversary of UTLA’s betrayal of the 2019 Los Angeles teachers’ strike, which was part of the wave of educators’ struggles in 2018-19, involving hundreds of thousands of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, along with Denver, Oakland, Chicago and other cities. The movement erupted in opposition to the unions, which had colluded in decades of austerity and school privatization, but it was contained with the help of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations, which helped the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) regain control, prevent a nationwide strike and defeat statewide and local struggles.

After 33,000 educators struck for six-days, the UTLA suddenly announced an agreement and gave teachers only three hours to review and discuss a 40-page contract. To prevent a revolt, the ratification did not take place at a mass membership meeting but was instead held in 900 splintered locations. UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl and other union officials hailed the tentative deal as a “historic victory,” although it abandoned the teachers’ most pressing demands to stop the expansion of charter schools and standardized testing. It also allotted teachers who have borne a decade of frozen wages only two annual wage increases, which fell short of the annual cost of living increases in Los Angeles. The agreement promised class-size reductions to “only” 38 students per classroom in 2020 and 35 in 2021.

Determined to prevent the Los Angeles strike from sparking statewide and national action against the bipartisan attack on teachers and public education, the UTLA ended the strike just before teachers in Oakland were set to walk out.

Maintaining its pro-capitalist policy of channeling mass opposition to social inequality into political dead-ends, on January 12 the UTLA joined other unions affiliated with the DSA in a “National Day of Resistance.” The event turned out to be nothing more than a “Twitter Storm” of social media posts under the slogan #BidenBeBold, which deliberately covered up the role of the unions and the president-elect who presided over historic attacks on public education during the Obama years and has pledged to open the majority of US schools by mid-April.

Days after Trump’s putsch attempt on the US Capitol, the UTLA and other educators’ unions are disarming workers before the threat of fascism, diverting left-wing opposition into the channels of racist politics and support for the Democratic enablers of the coup attempt, who now urge for “unity” and “healing” with the Republican conspirators.

“We cannot move forward as a country unless we recognize the roots of yesterday’s violence: structural racism and white supremacy,” proclaims a statement signed by the leading UTLA officials. But the real roots of the coup are the decades-long decline of American capitalism, endless militarism, and the growth of social inequality to levels that are completely incompatible with the maintenance of democracy.

With its racist presentation, the UTLA belittles the dangers facing the working class and conceals the political aims of the coup plotters and their accomplices in the Republican Party: to smash the resistance of workers to the back-to-school and back-to-work drive and abolish the slightest limitations on the exploitation of the working class.

The Democrats have no intention of warning the working class about the fascist danger because they fear this will spark an immense movement of opposition, which would disrupt their own efforts to reopen schools and force workers to pay for multi-trillion-dollar Wall Street bailout.

Like their counterparts in Chicago, New York and other cities, LA teachers, school nurses, and other education workers are being driven into a direct conflict with the Democrats and their hangers-on in the UTLA and other unions. In order to wage a serious struggle for high-quality education and the safety of students and workers, new organizations of collective struggle, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, must be built.

Educators must organize rank-and-file committees and link up with workers in the hospitals, factories, logistics industry, farmworkers and others in a political general strike to demand the immediate closure of schools and non-essential workplaces and full income to all workers. The private fortunes of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and other billionaires must be seized to fund mass vaccination, protect workers against evictions and hunger and to vastly improve public education, including remote learning and aid to parents and children to study at home until the pandemic is contained.

We urge LA educators, youth, and families to help build the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee, and workers and youth the globe over to form Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees in their communities. Draw the necessary political conclusions! The defense of students and workers against the pandemic and fascism is inseparable from the struggle for socialism!



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