

Boston Teachers Union agrees to return to in-person classes for thousands of students

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The Boston Teachers Union (BTU) came to a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) last week with the superintendent of Boston Public Schools (BPS), paving the way for thousands of students to return to in-person classes in the coming weeks. The agreement was reached two days before the BTU took part in last week's phony "Day of Resistance" protest aimed at appealing to Biden and the Democratic Party.

The BTU touted the January 10 MOA, stating that it would "extend key health, safety, and staffing protocols to the future reopening of all school buildings for the remainder of the school year." These false claims fly in the face of scientists' current understanding of the COVID-19 virus. Their purpose is to reassure the public about the homicidal act of gathering together large groups of youth and adults indoors during the most lethal pandemic in over a century, as part of a broader effort to drive the population back to work producing profits for the major corporations.

The MOA is the latest action taken by the City of Boston and its collaborators in the BTU in a campaign to further weaken the already limited protections contained in an earlier agreement signed on September 20.

The previous agreement stated the district would "transition to full remote learning for all students and BTU bargaining members will have the option to be remote as well" if the weekly citywide test positivity rate rises above four percent. However, the very next sentence stated: "When the Boston Public Health Commission or other City or State authority determines that the school district can reopen, BTU bargaining unit members will be expected to return to BPS buildings."

Two-and-a-half weeks later, on October 7, the Health Commission reported the positivity rate had risen to 4.1 percent, above the threshold for any in-person learning to take place, according to the MOA. Despite this, the Health Commission told City officials a few hours later that restarting a limited in-person model was "safe." BPS Superintendent Brenda Cassellius sent an email the same evening to all teachers of high needs students, falsely claiming the 4 percent threshold in their MOA was "conservative" and that they would "be expected to report to their school buildings."

Rather than calling for a sustained strike by its members, the BTU filed an injunction against Cassellius and Boston Mayor

Marty Walsh, claiming the city was violating the terms of the September 20 MOA. When an injunction was not immediately issued, the union announced it would launch multiple "Days of Action," supported by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and various pseudo-left local teachers unions and organizations tied to the DSA, including the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Oakland Education Association (OEA), United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), National Educators United (NEU), and Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE).

These phony "actions" culminated in the January 12 "Day of Resistance," in which organizers issued a series of tweets with the hashtag #BidenBeBold, pleading to Democrats for more funding to open the schools "safely." BTU President Jessica Tang and the leaders of more than a dozen local teachers unions that took part in last week's stunt protest also penned a letter to President-elect Joe Biden last month, praising his plan to reopen schools. The BTU also previously planned a "photo campaign," a phone call to Mayor Walsh, petitions and a planned "occupation" of a BPS administrative building that never materialized.

While the BTU took part in these stunts, lawyers representing the City of Boston in the BPS responded to the BTU lawsuit, citing the loophole in the September 9 MOA. On October 14, a superior court ruled in the city's favor. In his decision, Judge Robert Gordon noted that the MOA "assigned the judgment of whether and when teaching could safely occur within BPS facilities to independent health care professionals." The fact that all members of the Boston Public Health Commission are appointed by the mayor, and therefore cannot be considered "independent," was not mentioned.

Tang immediately released a conciliatory statement expressing her desire to "figure out a collaborative plan as soon as possible that includes safe staffing ratios, that reduces the viral footprint in our school buildings, and that ensures high-quality in-person instruction for our highest-needs students."

On October 22, after the citywide test positivity rate jumped from 4.4 to 5.7 percent over the span of seven days, BPS suspended all in-person learning. However, in a statement to state lawmakers, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Jeffrey Riley stated his view that schools should remain open "even if their local community

is designated as red, so long as there is no evidence of COVID-19 transmission in schools.”

Where such “evidence” might come from is unclear, given that school districts are not legally required to report coronavirus cases in Massachusetts. In response to calls for restarting in-person learning, the BTU signed a new MOA with the city on November 15, which stipulated that the “highest needs students” would return to in-person learning at four city schools despite the quickly rising positivity rate.

The January 10 MOA mandates a much larger return to in-person learning when positivity rates in the City of Boston rise *above* 5 percent for two consecutive weeks. With this rate hovering around 9 percent at the time of its signing, the agreement became effective immediately.

As it currently stands, Boston Public Schools will be welcoming back thousands of students on a rotating or “staggered” schedule, beginning on February 1, with “high in-person priority” students. General education students are to be phased in grade-by-grade on a “hybrid model,” in which they will qualify for two days of in-person learning a week. Per the terms of the agreement, all students will be eligible to return to in-person learning by April 1.

BPS and the BTU claim the back-to-school drive is safe and in students’ best interests. In reality, this is a homicidal act that will result in countless unnecessary deaths. From the outset, the agreements reached between the City and the BTU have included language ensuring even the most basic safety measures can and will be ignored.

For example, the agreement states “Schools without automated HVAC systems will operate with a combination of mechanical ventilation and open windows to maintain maximum ventilation without affecting recommended humidity and temperature levels (generally 68-77 degrees).” When one considers the weather conditions of New England winters, this sentence is nonsensical.

The agreement also requires BPS to provide alternative workspaces to teachers whose classrooms lack windows or do not otherwise meet DESE standards for air ventilation. However, the document then states that rooms not meeting DESE standards shall not be “used for in-person instruction or for workspace occupied by more than one person *to the extent the size of the workspace does not allow for appropriate social distancing in accordance with public health guidelines*” (emphasis added).

Translated into plain English, teachers can be made to work in rooms with no ventilation system whatsoever, as long as there is space for everyone to stay six feet apart.

The assertion that teachers and students can safely be together in a room with little to no ventilation, wearing reusable cloth or surgical masks, is ludicrous. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) both state that COVID-19 is an airborne virus, transmitted via respiratory droplets produced when people

breath, speak, cough or sneeze. These particles accumulate and can linger in poorly ventilated spaces for hours.

Before the pandemic spiraled out of control and the health care system was pushed to the brink of collapse, standard hospital practice was for patients infected with an airborne virus such as measles and tuberculosis to be placed in isolation rooms, some equipped with negative pressure systems to reduce the risk of transmission. When they were more readily available, health care workers who entered isolation rooms would wear single-use, fitted N95 masks to protect themselves.

And yet, despite the clear and obvious danger to the population, City and State officials have continued to mislead the public with their claims that reopening schools is safe.

There is now a large body of research from around the globe confirming that keeping schools open during a pandemic is catastrophic from a public health perspective. For example, scientists affiliated with the Medical University of Vienna concluded in mid-November that school closures in the US “have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent.”

Though children are the least likely to experience symptoms of COVID-19, those who do can develop life-threatening conditions like multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) described on the website of Massachusetts General Hospital as “a multi-organ, systemic infection that can develop in children with COVID-19 several weeks after infection. Complications... can include severe cardiac problems, shock and acute heart failure.”

The drive by local and state officials to reopen schools while claiming that doing so is safe is tantamount to a homicidal conspiracy. Yet there is immense opposition developing among educators and the entire working class, who rightly perceive the dangers. Educators in Massachusetts and across the country have formed Facebook groups using social media to share information and demand an end to the madness.

In cities and states across the US and internationally, workers have formed rank-and-file safety committees to set forth their demands and coordinate action. These organizations fight to unite and mobilize the enormous opposition among educators and all workers, which can only be done independently of both big business parties and the pro-capitalist teachers unions. We urge all those looking to carry forward this struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today!



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