Despite outbreaks at 373 New York City schools, Democrats and unions conspire to keep the district open

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In the two weeks since New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio reopened public schools after the holiday break ended on January 4, the COVID-19 test positivity rate in the city and the state has hovered near nine percent. Since de Blasio unilaterally reopened schools in early December, which was endorsed and facilitated by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the citywide test positivity rate has more than doubled and the number of daily new cases has reached its worst point since the start of the pandemic.

Yesterday, 373 schools were closed due to outbreaks, a record high. Even according to the inadequate testing program of the city—which only mandates that 20 percent of students and staff are tested monthly—nearly 4,000 people have tested positive for COVID-19 since January 3 in the city's schools.

This state of affairs is the result of a deliberate and systematic policy of developing "herd immunity" by allowing the virus to spread uncontrolled throughout the population. While this policy was spearheaded by the Trump administration, in New York the Democratic administrations of Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo are overseeing the same brutal policies. At a press conference on Tuesday, de Blasio falsely stated, "we have not seen anything change and schools remain safe," adding, "this approach is working."

Earlier this month, Cuomo announced that schools will not be obligated to close when the test positivity rate reaches nine percent, a highly elevated figure that he had mandated in August. No threshold at all now remains and cases continue to rise in New York City and throughout the state. In neighboring New Jersey, where many city educators live, schools will remain open for pre-K through 5th grade instruction.

Cuomo explicitly spelled out the rationale for abolishing a positivity threshold when he said in his State of the State address on January 11, "We simply cannot stay closed until the vaccine hits critical mass. The cost is too high. We will have nothing left to open. We must reopen the economy." In other words, there can be no let-up in the extraction of profits for Wall Street, so schools and businesses must reopen before the vaccine is widely distributed.

In a further bid to fully reopen schools as quickly as possible, the city and state have now prioritized vaccinating educators. In collaboration with the de Blasio administration, the UFT is presenting the vaccination of teachers as a panacea for the pandemic. At a January 10 press conference, UFT President Michael Mulgrew said, "this is the beginning of getting to the end of this horrible crisis that this entire city and country and world is going through." He of course neglected to mention that open schools are currently fueling the spread of the pandemic.

The danger of community spread from open schools and the stalled vaccine rollout was underscored by the deaths of two education workers this month. The educators have not been identified by the Department of Education, which has stated that they had medical accommodations and worked from home.

The vaccination distribution throughout New York has been sluggish and disorganized. Some educators have had their appointments canceled or have been told that they should book appointments later. At his Tuesday press conference, de Blasio praised President-elect Joe Biden's plan to vaccinate 100 million people in his first 100 days in office, while acknowledging that the city would run out of vaccines on Thursday and would not be able to vaccinate anyone until the following Wednesday.

Opposition to the current state of affairs remains high among educators. On Facebook, one city teacher commented yesterday, "We're in a PANDEMIC! Schools are a breathing ground for many viruses and germs. So, during this time please think of those that are risking their lives and their families lives without any extra pay."

Another remarked on Twitter, "My school just reopened

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on Jan 10th. Received an email today saying it is closed yet again due to confirmed cases. This is madness for students, families AND teachers!"

Some educators proposed a sickout on January 4, prompting Mulgrew to posture and declare that if the positivity rate in the city reaches nine percent according to the lower state estimates, "We shut it down. If there's cases in the school and that hits those criteria, we shut it down." He quickly added, however, that now was not the time for a strike, stating, "But the vast majority of schools of course have stayed open, have been really safe. We want to keep them open. We want to serve our kids and our families. And there's no place safer to be in New York City than in our public schools."

No faction or caucus within the UFT has presented a program for closing the schools besides saying that it would support a strike by the UFT, a highly unlikely scenario. These factions issue no calls to organize a strike. Rather, they aim to sow illusions in the UFT, presenting it as an organization that can be reformed and pressured not only to close the schools, but to struggle against Wall Street itself.

For example, the Movement of Rank-and File Educators (MORE) is a caucus in the UFT that is affiliated with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), and other pseudo-left local teachers unions through the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators (UCORE).

Each of these organizations, along with National Educators United (NEU) and other pseudo-left groups, is also affiliated through the Demand Safe Schools coalition, which organized the stunt protest "Day of Resistance" last week. The entire aim of the protest was to pressure Biden and the Democrats for more funding to open the schools "safely," with the central slogan of #BidenBeBold.

The leadership of MORE is populated by supporters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which functions as the left wing of the Democratic Party. On January 5, MORE penned a resolution to be presented to a UFT Delegate Assembly, titled, "The UFT should fight to Tax the Rich and #InvestInOurNY." Invest in Our New York is another coalition of groups oriented towards the Democratic Party in the state.

The resolution requests "that the UFT educate and mobilize our membership and parent allies to support the Invest in Our NY coalition in grassroots lobbying efforts and protest actions this spring."

Although the Democratic Party is never mentioned in the document, it hinges on the assumption that this reactionary capitalist party can be persuaded to bite the hand that feeds it and impose a moderate tax on billionaires in New York State though the medium of the UFT.

An earlier and even more backward statement issued by MORE this month, written no doubt in response to the rumors that educators wanted a sickout as school resumed on January 4, was titled, "School Buildings Should Be Closed Right Now." The statement presented school reopenings in racial terms, making the claim that "Mayor de Blasio is yet again catering to the demands of a group of largely upper-middle class white families, at the expense of the majority of students and school staff."

While it is true that elements of New York City's substantial upper middle class have been active in small protests to open the schools, here MORE is floating the socially retrograde suggestion that the policies of herd immunity and massive school openings throughout the US are not a class policy of Wall Street implemented by the Democrats and Republicans, but rather an individual politician's allegiance to a race.

This backwards outlook is also apparent with MORE's charge that "the DOE has offered little support for the Black and Brown parents and families that make up the core of the DOE's constituency." It is significant that the terms "Democratic Party," "Wall Street" and "working class" do not appear in this document.

Over the past 10 months, MORE has proven itself unable and unwilling to organize any type of strike action among educators to close the schools because it is part and parcel of the UFT. These pseudo-left forces are equally beholden to the Democratic Party and if they controlled the UFT it would be in all essentials the same organization implementing the same policies.

Only the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to mobilize educators, parents, students and all workers independently of both big business parties and the pro-capitalist unions which have conspired to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces. We have consistently opposed the reopening of schools, denounced the promotion of pseudoscience claiming this can be done "safely" amid the raging pandemic, and encouraged the broadest strike action to stop these homicidal policies. We urge all New York City educators, parents and students to join and help build our committee as widely as possible by signing up today at wsws.org/edsafety !

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