

US educators confront Democrats and the unions in battle to close schools and save lives

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In its first week in office, the Biden administration has begun to fulfill its pledge to reopen the majority of schools across the United States during the worst stage of the pandemic. Officially, there have now been 25,861,597 infections and 431,392 deaths from COVID-19 in the US alone, with a seven-day moving average of 3,182 people dying every day.

Biden's reckless plan to reopen schools has the full support of Democratic Party politicians in every major city, as well as their backers in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates, including so-called "progressive" locals such as the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and others.

The CTU is being presented by the corporate media as oppositional, despite only taking a strike vote three weeks after allowing schools to reopen. The union has accepted the return to classrooms of pre-K and special education teachers and students, which continued Monday despite the massive 71 percent vote in support of a strike. They have engaged in over 60 secret negotiations with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials and are desperately trying to reach a deal by Wednesday, when CPS is demanding that K-8 teachers return to classrooms before thousands more students return next Monday.

Democratic Party officials decided to back away from their threat to lock teachers out on Monday for an "illegal strike" and are engaged in frenzied talks with the union to find some way to package a return-to-school deal before Wednesday.

At the union's Monday morning press conference, CTU President Jesse Sharkey stated, "We want to get a safe reopening agreement, that's the goal. No one wants to be locked out of their classroom in the middle of a pandemic." CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates seconded this, stating, "We are working to get an agreement."

After New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) set the precedent last fall in reopening the largest school district in the country, Democrats have reached agreements with teachers unions to reopen schools in Houston, Boston, Baltimore, Washington D.C., Detroit, Salt Lake City, Michigan, Washington, Oregon, California, and numerous other cities and states.

While the Trump administration and its Republican backers spearheaded school reopenings last summer and fall, Biden and the Democrats have taken up this mantle with the backing of the

teachers unions. The new administration is equally committed to sacrificing lives for profit before the population is widely vaccinated and the pandemic is brought under control. With roughly half of the 56.6 million K-12 students in the US presently attending school remotely, Biden's goal of fully reopening all schools by the end of April will vastly accelerate the spread of the pandemic.

At a press conference Monday, Biden stated casually, "We're in this for a while. What are we now, at about 410,000 deaths? And there's going to be more." He added, "the predictions were we're going to see somewhere between a total of 600,000 and 660,000 deaths before we begin to turn the corner in a major way."

Expressing the indifference of the ruling class to the mass death and suffering they have inflicted on workers throughout the pandemic, Biden undercounted the number of deaths from COVID-19 by over 20,000 and presented another 170,000-230,000 deaths as a fait accompli.

Later in the press conference, he sidestepped a question on whether teachers should be vaccinated before schools reopen, falsely claiming that minimal safety precautions and expanded COVID-19 testing will make a "safe reopening of schools" possible.

He stated, "The teachers I know, they want to work. They just want to work in a safe environment, as safe as we can rationally make it. And we can do that, and we should be able to open up every school, kindergarten through eighth grade, if in fact we administer these tests."

While politicians have falsely claimed they are solely motivated by the academic and emotional needs of children, Biden made clear the economic interests underlying the bipartisan drive to reopen schools. "[I]t'll have the added advantage, I might add, of putting millions of people back to work. All those mothers and fathers that are home, taking care of their children rather than go to work, even when they can work." He added, "So, this is about generating economic growth overall as well."

Chicago Public Schools favorably tweeted Biden's comments, writing, "We couldn't agree more." AFT President Randi Weingarten also voiced her support, while the CTU tweeted, "Thank you, President Biden. Exactly what educators have been saying, and responses from parents have shown since last March."

Last Thursday, the day after his inauguration, Biden released his "National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness," a 200-page document outlining his supposed

“coordinated pandemic response.” The plan, which the unions have similarly endorsed, amounts to little more than a PR campaign to “restore trust with the American people,” while calling for increased testing and proceeding with the laggard distribution of the vaccine. The word “lockdown” does not appear in the document, while “reopen” appears 81 times. The phrase “safely reopen schools” appears 10 times and is the focus of “Goal Five” of the plan.

As most educators and parents understand, it is impossible to safely reopen schools anywhere in the US at present. The seven-day rolling average presently stands at 174,774 daily new cases, undoubtedly a significant undercount, while the highly transmissible B.1.1.7 variant of the virus (the UK variant) has been found in at least 24 states and is spreading largely undetected throughout the country.

Without issuing any press release or data, the AFT silently informed the *Washington Post* recently that they tracked at least 530 deaths among K-12 teachers in 2020 alone, a figure that will vastly increase in the coming months if Biden’s plan is implemented with the support of the unions.

There is enormous opposition to school reopenings among educators, parents, students and the broader working class. In the South, educators are mobilizing in the face of mounting deaths stemming from school reopenings in Alabama and Georgia.

Last week, a staggering four educators in Montgomery, Alabama, succumbed to COVID-19. In a powerful demonstration of the true relationship of forces, on Monday after weeks of protests, and the formation of the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, dozens of teachers in the school district organized a sickout, prompting local officials to announce a switch to full virtual learning. The district aims to delay this closure of schools until February 1, but there is huge sentiment for an immediate end to in-person learning.

This rebellion took place independently of and in opposition to the Alabama Education Association (AEA), which after the deaths of the four educators last week merely called for a “reevaluation” of the district’s safety measures, stressing, “It is not our intention to point the finger or allege blame.”

In Georgia, three educators working in the Cobb County School District have died from COVID-19 in the past month, including teacher Dana Johnson and paraprofessional Cynthia Lindsey just last week. Over 100 educators and parents protested at a local school board meeting last week, during which Superintendent Chris Ragsdale and another school board member provocatively refused to wear face masks despite an attendee requesting they do so in honor of Patrick Key, the third teacher who died on Christmas Day who had actively encouraged others to wear masks.

On Monday, more than 120 teachers in Cobb County did not report to their classrooms due to being diagnosed with COVID-19 or being in quarantine after being exposed to the virus.

A teacher in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which is run by the Democrats, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “My district is back in person now. The board voted to send us back in early January. Most grades came back today, the remainder come in two weeks. It’s all very scary and a little depressing. Our superintendent was determined to get us back. She was seriously

missed in the fall when the board voted to remain virtual.”

Speaking on the role of the Lancaster City Education Association (LCEA), she commented, “Our union rolled over and agreed with the decision to resume in-person learning. The president addressed the board, telling them in the same breath that most members surveyed wanted to remain virtual, but we’ll go along with their decision.”

The same processes are unfolding in every school district that has not yet reopened, and this can only be opposed through the broadest possible mobilization of the working class. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which the Socialist Equality Party has helped organize, has established a network of independent rank-and-file committees in New York, Michigan, Illinois, California, Texas, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, with plans to form further committees in Utah, Colorado, Washington and other states in the coming days.

These committees adhere to the scientific principles that in order to contain the pandemic there must be an immediate nationwide lockdown involving the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces with full compensation to workers and small businesses. Only health care, food production, energy, logistics and other truly essential workplaces should remain open to provide for the needs of the working class, with the full protection for workers.

The pandemic profiteers—including hundreds of US billionaires who have amassed over \$1 trillion during the pandemic—must be made to pay for massive social programs to ensure that every educator and student has state-of-the-art technology needed for remote learning, and that every family is provided with health care, financial support, therapy and all other services they need.

We urge all educators, parents, students and workers to join and help expand this network of committees across the US and internationally. Preparations must be made for a nationwide political general strike in direct opposition to the Democrats, Republicans, and the unions that have conspired to reopen schools and businesses on behalf of the financial elite. To learn more about this program and get involved, sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!



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