

Network meeting of action committees for safe education discusses Europe-wide school strike

Our reporters
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“No opening of schools and day-care centres before the pandemic is under control!”—this is the call by the Network of Action Committees for Safe Education in a resolution unanimously adopted on Monday evening.

In introducing the resolution at an online meeting, Gregor Link of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) described the “war-like conditions” of the coronavirus pandemic in several European countries, where the B.1.1.7 strain of the virus is rapidly spreading. He cited the horrendous number of coronavirus deaths in Germany, stressing that 20,000 COVID patients have already died since the beginning of 2021 alone. “These people have not simply fallen victim to a medical phenomenon; a policy that puts profits before human lives killed them.”

Federal and regional politicians of all stripes were reducing schools and day-care centres to child-minding institutions to keep businesses open. “Mere appeals to these politicians are futile,” he concluded. The demand for a comprehensive lockdown could only be enforced “if students, teachers, educators and parents take their safety into their own hands.” The action committees would have to align their resistance with that of workers in the factories threatened by mass layoffs and wage cuts in the pandemic. What was needed was a “frontal attack on the capitalist system” which the pandemic had “exposed in the eyes of billions of people.”

The international character of this struggle was underscored by the contribution of Genevieve Leigh, IYSSE Chair in the USA. Speaking on behalf of the US Socialist Equality Party, Leigh stressed that students, teachers, educators, parents, and workers in the US faced the same issues. “In the struggle to preserve human life, colleges, universities and secondary schools are becoming central battlegrounds.” In contrast, she said, university administrators, unions and Republicans and Democrats alike were “on the other side.”

The new US President Joe Biden was also a representative of the ruling oligarchy, Leigh pointed out. She said his administration was committed to opening educational institutions by the spring. “The Democrats are continuing Trump’s murderous, pro-business policies in the pandemic.”

Leigh explained the connection of the January 6 fascist coup attempt to the coronavirus pandemic and rapidly growing social inequality. She said it was a “political fact that the fascists’ most important demand was for the removal of all restrictions on economic life.” Joe Biden was calling for “unity” with the same Republicans and right-wing Trump supporters responsible for the coup attempt. “The framework of official policy is not moving to the left, but further to the right.”

It was only in this context that Facebook’s current attacks on the accounts of socialists, left-wing oppositionists and anti-war activists could be understood, she said. Leigh reported that Facebook had censored and closed at least six accounts of leading members of the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE last week without any justification. They were only restored on Monday after immense public pressure. “The immediate censorship has been lifted, but the fundamental threat remains,” Leigh said.

She described the work of the network of independent action committees in the US, where committees have already been established in New York, Michigan, California, Texas, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Tennessee; they are also planned in Utah, Colorado and Washington. The pandemic had produced the deepest crisis since the American Civil War, she said. “A year ago, the first patient in the US tested positive for COVID-19, and now more than 425,000 people have died and 25 million have been infected.” Also, she said, many had seen their livelihoods destroyed, millions of workers have been forced into unemployment and tens of thousands of small

businesses have closed. At the same time, “the fortunes of the rich grew to stratospheric heights.”

This important contribution was followed by a lively discussion. Meret (18), a high school graduate from Bremen, who together with fellow students had enforced distance learning at her school, reported that in her part-time job in the care sector, she had already witnessed the deaths of five people. The next step, she said, must be to coordinate the school boycott for consistent school closures nationwide. However, establishment politicians were using the pressure of exams to force graduating classes into schools.

This was also confirmed by Jaimy, a high school student from Saxony. He reported that his graduating class has been forced back into schools since 18 January. Florian from Baden-Württemberg listed several examples of new strikes and initiatives at schools, where resistance is forming in Saarland, Saxony, Brandenburg and elsewhere. He stressed the importance of working together to fight the pandemic globally in the face of the new strains. “The virus is spreading across national borders, and in the same way, you can only stop it with measures that are not limited to the national sphere.”

Joshua, a student from Bavaria, spoke about the pathetic role played by the so-called “left” parties and trade unions in the pandemic, confirming that the GEW education union had demanded the reopening of schools in the summer and called the compulsory wearing of masks “pedagogically nonsensical.” He stressed, “The struggle must be independent of and against these tendencies.”

Tamino, a student from Karlsruhe, then spoke about the massive problems in distributing the vaccine and warned against equating the start of vaccination with a return to normality. “The global demand for the vaccine has increased tensions between countries. Instead of decisions on distribution being shared internationally, quantities are negotiated through nationalist struggles between countries.”

Clemens, who is currently volunteering in a day-care centre, spoke about the social situation of many workers under conditions of rising unemployment, where “mini-jobbers,” temporary workers and solo self-employed workers would be pushed into poverty by the pandemic and were being downright blackmailed. “The official reports gloss over the real figures,” he said. “The unions have been suppressing industrial action all last year and they support ending the lockdown.” That is why, he said, it was crucial to unite internationally in the new strikes that are breaking out, independently of the unions.

Students and educators at the meeting also described their particular situations. Christopher, a student from Leipzig, reported that he had contracted COVID-19 at his part-time job as a bicycle courier for a fast-food chain and had been fired for informing his colleagues about it. He gave a vivid picture of this hard work under intense time pressure and poor pay. He illustrated how profit-hungry businesses were systematically covering up the coronavirus outbreaks.

Martin, an educator from Leipzig, described the great anger that was spreading among educators as they worked with large groups of children without protection and were being burned out by politicians in the pandemic.

The resolution “For a European-wide school strike against the opening of schools!” was adopted unanimously. Christoph Vandreier, Vice-Chair of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), then summarised the main lessons. He said that the scale of the pandemic had made “all the issues we have been explaining for a long time now come to life in a very concrete way.” Leigh had made this clear in her contribution on the connection between Trump’s fascist coup attempt and the ruling elite’s murderous pandemic policies. “The ruling class is betting on the politics of death; its entire social system is bankrupt,” Vandreier stated.

Workers and students were being put under massive pressure to return to the factories and schools under conditions of the ongoing pandemic, “so that profits continue to flow.” Vandreier stressed the importance of responding offensively to these attacks. “There is huge opposition. We must provide a strong, international, and comprehensive response to this. For this, we need a very broad movement that includes the entire working class. Only a general strike can force the closure of all non-essential workplaces. For this, we need a socialist perspective.”



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