

Unite with educators in Chicago and across the US! Close all schools and nonessential workplaces!

Pennsylvania educators oppose statewide reopening of K-8 schools

**Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
29 January 2021**

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee wholeheartedly supports the ongoing resistance of Chicago educators to the demands of Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to force 10,000 educators and 71,000 K-8 students into unsafe buildings by February 1.

Chicago educators voted by 71 percent not to return for in-person instruction and to strike if the district retaliated against teachers defying orders. However, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has conspired against the teachers, allowing a phased-in return of Pre-K and Special Education teachers and punitively isolating "locked-out" teachers who refused to enter buildings. The CTU is engaged in frenzied negotiations to push through a reopening of schools in line with the policies of the Democratic Party in Illinois and nationwide.

This fight is our fight and the fight of educators everywhere. There is no "safe" return to school when the pandemic is totally out of control and has entered a new and deadlier phase. Resistance is growing to these homicidal policies, both nationally and internationally, including in Democratic Party-controlled Montgomery, Alabama where teachers this week conducted a sickout fighting for the right to teach fully remotely.

Under Pennsylvania's Democratic Governor Tom Wolf, state guidelines mandating virtual instruction under conditions of "substantial" viral spread have been left entirely at the discretion of a patchwork of 500 local school districts' administrations.

Now even the toothless state recommendations have been swept away. Starting on January 25, all districts are encouraged to return elementary school students to in-person learning regardless of the level of community spread, fully in line with the Biden administration's directive to reopen K-8 schools nationally within his first 100 days in office.

Philadelphia Schools, also under local Democratic Party control, is the 18th largest school district in the country, with over 18,000 staff and 200,000 students. After two attempts last

year to reopen for face-to-face instruction met with fierce public opposition, Philadelphia schools have announced that K-2 classrooms will reopen on February 22, with older grades being phased in.

Earlier this month, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) President Jerry Jordan signaled his approval, stating that during contract negotiations the union secured a series of conditions necessary to open schools, complete with grievance procedures to enforce them.

"I think teachers want to be in the classroom; they want to be face-to-face with kids; kids need direct instruction," Jordan said. "We as a district and union are farther ahead than many places." This boils down to facilitating countless more deaths and disease, despite his call for "more assurances" that schools are "safe."

For its part, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) has worked throughout the pandemic to block teachers' opposition to working in unsafe buildings across the state. Instead of mobilizing its 187,000 members to fight, the PSEA has issued mealy mouthed calls on the governor to enforce state guidelines.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is wholly independent of the Democrats, Republicans and the unions, stands for a lockdown of all nonessential businesses and fully-remote learning until the pandemic is contained. Democratic Governor Wolf and President Joe Biden are demanding in-person learning, with the connivance of the unions, for only one purpose—to force workers back to work in unsafe conditions. These measures are being taken with complete disregard for human life. In opposition to these policies, we say not one more child or educator should die.

What are we facing in Pennsylvania?

Currently, teachers' and students' lives are being treated with absolute disregard. More than 830,000 people have officially contracted the virus in Pennsylvania and over 21,350 people have died. Just since November 1, over 600,000 people

have contracted COVID-19 and 12,000 people have died.

Overall, Pennsylvania ranks 8th in the number of cases and 5th in the number of deaths out of all the US states. Nationally, one in 14 people has officially been infected, and over 400,000 people have died, more than all those who died fighting in the Second World War. Seroprevalence studies indicate that the real number of infections is closer to one-third of the US population.

Teachers forced to work face to face are not even being equipped with enough personal protective equipment (PPE). One district sent an email stating that PPE should only be used in emergency situations and when hand sanitizer is gone!

Thousands, if not tens of thousands of teachers and staff, have been denied their legal rights to accommodations or otherwise forced to leave the profession due to lack of safety. This has compounded the crisis for those who remain.

Bus drivers report that they are being told to keep windows open while temperatures drop into their teens. At least 74 bus drivers have died of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

The state refuses to tell us the truth as to COVID-19-related deaths of educators or students. Indicating the widespread tragedy across the state, Harrisburg University Professor Charles Shearrow, who along with his students worked to produce 3D-printed face shields for first responders, has succumbed to the disease himself. Countless others have been infected through community spread.

Under conditions in which vaccines are now available with the promise of ending this deadly pandemic, sending children and educators back into classrooms will only exacerbate its further spread. The science is clear: keeping children and teachers in the classroom is spreading the pandemic, prolonging this disaster and leading to more illnesses and death.

The pandemic has created enormous economic and emotional burdens on parents and students who cannot attend in-person classes. The politicians have sought to pit parents against teachers, by blaming teachers for millions being out of work.

We seek to mobilize the power of all educators, parents and students along with all workers throughout the state, in unity with our sister committees across the United States and throughout the world, to prepare for a general strike to achieve the following demands:

- An end to all in-person instruction until the vaccine has been administered to all people and the virus eliminated!
- A shutdown of all nonessential production with full income protection for all workers who cannot work!
- Full funding for remote learning, including computers, audio visual equipment and high-speed internet connection!

As many educators have pointed out, schools are not magical places where the virus does not spread. It is impossible to cram students into overcrowded classrooms and schools and prevent the virus from spreading. Research from multiple studies now provides evidence to show that opening schools in communities with high levels of transmission is a major contributor to higher

case numbers, hospitalizations and deaths.

Further, the Pennsylvania vaccine rollout has been dismal. Six weeks after the approval of the vaccine, fewer than half of the state's first 1.6 million doses have been administered. Many health care workers as well as clients in long-term care facilities have not yet been vaccinated. We call for these critical vaccines to be safely administered to all essential workers, educators, school employees, students, parents and the majority of the population prior to schools being reopened.

While study after study have shown that reopening of schools leads to spikes in their communities and deaths, the State University System and other state-supported schools are reopening. The Wolf administration never ordered the closing of private universities.

This crisis is a political one. The means exist to bring the virus under control and save lives. But both the Democrats and Republicans are parties of big business and the banks, whose only concern is the wealth of their capitalist constituents. Biden has made clear that he will not order a shutdown and follows in the footsteps of the Trump administration in prioritizing the growth of share values on Wall Street over lives.

The network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees of which we are a part is organized independently of the big business political parties and the pro capitalist unions. We do not seek to put pressure on politicians or union bureaucrats, nor do we ask for someone else to save us. These are the methods of preserving the status quo. We reject any orientation towards pseudoleft union caucuses or "corporate campaigns." The latter are public relations coverups for the unions and useless appeals to the capitalist elite, who are directly responsible for the crisis. Any such orientation will only lead to defeat, as they have so many times before.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is working with our sister committees throughout the country and internationally to prepare for a political general strike. Only the mobilization of the entire working class—including workers in steel, auto, health care, retail, Amazon and other industries—can stop this pandemic. Join us this Saturday, January 30, at 1:00 p.m. EST at our national meeting, "The Growing Educators' Rebellion and the Fight Against the Pandemic."



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