

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets as Democrats push to restart in-person classes in Chicago and other cities

Sandy English
3 February 2021

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the United States held its second public meeting of 2021 on Saturday, January 30, to discuss the fight against the Biden administration's drive to reopen schools as the coronavirus pandemic reaches a new and deadlier phase. The meeting was held as thousands of Chicago educators were battling efforts by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to resume in-person classes in the nation's third largest school district.

The meeting was attended by nearly 200 people, most of them educators from all across the United States, as well as Europe, Latin America and Asia. Leading members of the Socialist Equality Party addressed the meeting as did rank-and-file educators from Chicago, Alabama and Pennsylvania. Also speaking were a nurse in Southern California, the current epicenter of the pandemic in the US, and a Baltimore Amazon worker, who called for a common fight with teachers against unsafe conditions.

Also attending were members of rank-and-file safety committees, which have been set up by educators in Northern California, San Diego, Los Angeles, Texas, Chicago, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Detroit and New York City, along with Germany and the United Kingdom. Members of committees set up by autoworkers, Amazon and other workers also took part.

Evan Blake, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, opened the meeting by outlining the devastating impact of the coronavirus on society: at least 3,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the US every day in January, amounting to nearly 10,000 lives lost in this country alone. Internationally, the figure stands at 386,000 dead in January, an average daily death rate of 12,800 people and climbing.

Scientists have warned for months that the more that the virus spreads, the more it changes and the more that it changes, the greater possibility that it will evolve and become less susceptible to vaccines. The logic of the situation, Blake said, is that the new more infectious variants threaten to vastly expand the spread of the pandemic, further saturating hospitals beyond their capacity and leading to a massive increase in deaths.

"The most irrational and backwards measure to take at this stage of the pandemic would be to reopen schools and businesses," but that is exactly what is happening, the speaker noted.

Trump was the most blatant supporter of "herd immunity," speaking for the most ruthless and reactionary sections of the ruling class, Blake said. "Biden has now taken up this mantle" and is spearheading the drive to reopen schools. This has been expressed most sharply in Chicago, where the fight by educators to prevent the reopening of schools has become a major focal point of the class struggle in the US.

Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson are desperately trying to force educators back into the classrooms. For its part, the Chicago Teachers Union, which is fully

integrated with the Democratic Party, has sought to maneuver with the Lightfoot administration every step of the way.

Blake emphasized that the resistance of Chicago educators is seen as a threat by the entire ruling class because reopening schools is the essential linchpin to the campaign to reopen the broader economy and to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces.

Early on in the pandemic, he recalled, Trump and his supporters mobilized far-right organizations and armed militias to storm state capitols in Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other states to demand an end to lockdowns and any public health measures that undermined business activity. This was the prelude to the January 6 fascist coup attempt. But rather than opposing this fascist threat, Biden has called for "unity" with Trump's Republican co-conspirators.

"It's entirely possible," Blake noted, "that the death toll could surpass one million, unless the working class intervenes." The opposition of teachers has to become part of a broader movement of workers in the US and internationally to save lives. "The purpose of our rank-and-file committees is to serve as a force of opposition to the union bureaucracies, to create a framework for educators and all workers to be able to exert their own independent interests, and really to serve as organs of working class democracy and a voice for all workers."

The next speaker, Dr. Benjamin Mateus, gave a detailed report on the emergence of the new more virulent strains of the virus and repudiated the false claims by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the corporate media that schools were not major centers for the transmission of the deadly virus.

The slides from Dr. Mateus' presentation are available [here](#).

The widely publicized CDC report was based on a sample of small rural districts in Wisconsin, where all students wore three-layer cloth masks, and conditions were overseen by researchers which was not representative of real-life conditions. A series of scientific reports in Canada, India and other countries found that closing schools was one of the surest ways to prevent community transmission.

A teacher from Chicago, a leading member of the Chicago Rank-and-File Safety Committee, said Mayor Lightfoot wanted people back at work and was demanding that schools reopen so parents could return to work. "It is an issue of childcare for them, not education," the teacher said.

The Chicago Public Schools only agreed to discuss reopening plans once a large group of teachers, the K-8 teachers, refused to return this past week, she said. The Chicago Teachers Union did not organize any action when the district started "phased" resumption of in-person instruction, starting with pre-K and cluster teachers on January 4.

"The unions are not going to protect all of us," she said. "Joining the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is how we must fight. This is why only we can defend ourselves. No one is going to save us. There must

be a nationally coordinated response to stop all the reopenings, and it has to be organized independently of the unions.”

James, a former paraprofessional in the Detroit Public Schools and a member of the Michigan Rank-and-File Safety Committee, said city officials were rushing to resume in-person schooling by early March. “This is being driven, not by the needs of children,” he said, “but the needs of GM, Ford and other auto companies, which have been bitterly complaining about high absentee rates among workers caring for their children.” He said the committee was fighting to unite teachers and autoworkers in a common fight to close schools and halt nonessential production.

A member of the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, a teacher in Montgomery, Alabama, told the meeting she had gained “a lot of courage from just listening and hearing about what others are doing.”

She described how the struggle of educators in her district had developed when a teacher started a Facebook page, and colleagues began to express their fears and concerns about returning back to school in unsafe conditions. Soon educators were standing in front of the superintendent’s office. “It was a bold statement here in Alabama, for anyone to do anything like that,” she said.

Another educator from Montgomery said the reaction of district officials was, “How dare you all stand up to us? You do what we say. No, you can’t do that.” She said broad areas of the workforce in Alabama need to protect themselves for COVID infection. “There are Hyundai and Mercedes plants here where people are just working and dying, and nobody’s saying anything about it. Walmart and grocery stores are open, and they’re still playing sports.”

Tania, an educator and member of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, noted that there is an average of 1,200 deaths per day in the United Kingdom, which had the highest per capita death rate in the world. She said this was not accidental since it was Boris Johnson’s government that first launched the criminal and reactionary social policy of herd immunity, which enabled the uncontrolled spread of the virus and the circulation of the new variant.

“Some 400,000 members of the National Education Union attended a mass online meeting demanding protection on January 3. Tens of thousands of teachers refused to turn up to work the following day on January 4, across primary schools. It was in response to this action by educators that the lockdown was finally announced, the very same evening.”

The unions, she continued, which were totally compromised throughout the pandemic by their refusal to organize any action to defend their members, are now attempting to posture as defenders of teachers and support staff.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the United Kingdom is advancing the call for independent action by workers to demand the closure of schools and nonessential industries with full compensation, Tania concluded.

Gregor Link of the Network of Rank-and-File Committees in Germany and a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* said Germany had been hailed as a model for how to cope with the pandemic, but now Germany and Europe were seeing levels of death at rates that resembled those in a “major war.”

In January alone, Germany recorded more than 40,000 deaths, surpassing the US death toll in relative terms. Hospitals and crematoria have become overloaded. This was a direct result of the yearlong campaign by the political establishment to keep schools open as long as possible and always reopen them as soon as possible.

In response, he said, “the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party in Germany have begun organizing biweekly online meetings of students, teachers and parents to prepare for a Europe-wide school strike and a broadly based general

strike.”

Speaking next was Zac Corrigan, who reported on the 2018-19 teachers strikes in West Virginia and other states for the *World Socialist Web Site*. The strikes, he said, broke out independently of the union among teachers, who organized themselves in Facebook Messenger groups and “met in person independently of the union and decided that they were going to launch a mass walkout. And that’s what they did.”

But the teacher unions did everything they could to stop the strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago and other areas from coalescing into a nationwide strike against austerity and inequality. The unions, aided by such forces as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), then sold out the strikes. “If teachers had rank-and-file committees back then,” he said, “which would have united educators and all sections of workers, the outcome would have been totally different,” he said.

Elizabeth, a nurse in Long Beach, near Los Angeles, spoke next. “This has hit LA very, very hard,” she said, “and as for nurses, the hospitals don’t provide enough PPE, just like what’s happening with teachers.”

She spoke of the law in California that only allows so many patients per nurse and how California Governor Newsom has allowed that to be overridden, so that nurses are responsible for more patients that they are able to care for.

Summing up the meeting, Jerry White, the labor editor of the WSW, said the devastating death toll from the virus in every country revealed the “class structure of society” and the thoroughly outmoded character of capitalism, a social system that sacrifices human life for profit.

White asked the audience to consider the role of the unions and of pseudoleft organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America. “They tell workers and teachers to expend our energy appealing to the powers-that-be, to the Democratic Party, to those who defend the opposite class interests. ‘Maybe we can appeal to their conscience, and they’ll change their minds,’ they say. No, they won’t. Only the working class produces society’s wealth, and they are determined to pump out the profits from workers to pay for the massive bailout of Wall Street, no matter how many workers die.”

White said that the Hunts Point Produce Market strike in New York City and the current struggle of the Chicago teachers were part of the growing worldwide response of the working class to the pandemic. What is decisive is building the leadership necessary to reorganize society based on human needs, not private profit. He closed the meeting by urging everyone to support the *World Socialist Web Site*, which was the international voice of the working class, and to join the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact