

Washington D.C. files restraining order to prevent teachers' strike and reopen schools

Harvey Simpkins
3 February 2021

On Monday, Democratic-led Washington D.C. filed an emergency motion for a temporary restraining order against the Washington Teachers Union (WTU), seeking an injunction to prevent teachers “from participating in a strike or other work stoppage.” The legal action comes as District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) reopened 114 schools on Tuesday, and seeks to prevent the WTU from holding meetings where any work stoppages could be discussed.

The legal move to forestall strike action takes place amid a growing wave of resistance by educators nationwide, including most notably in Chicago, where teachers in the third largest school district in the US continue to refuse to return to work despite the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) negotiating a reopening plan with Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

The situation in Washington D.C. is very similar to that in Chicago. For months, the WTU has stifled any collective action by teachers. Only sickouts conducted by rank-and-file educators prevented an earlier opening. Last October, the WTU was prepared to reach a reopening agreement with DCPS but was stopped when teachers insisted on the ability to reject in-person assignments as part of any agreement.

On November 2, after a wave of teacher sickouts and days before the US elections, DCPS officials decided against attempting to force reopening. However, in December the union reached a rotten deal with the school system to allow reopenings to proceed. The deal only required that certain inadequate safety measures be met, overseen by unqualified walk-through committees at each school.

In a last-ditch maneuver, the WTU filed an arbitration action on January 20, arguing that the school system had failed to adhere to the December agreement. On January 30, the arbitrator rejected most of the WTU's

claims, ensuring that all but two city schools would reopen this week.

This legal gambit having failed, the WTU faces growing calls for collective action by its membership. The D.C. government's legal filing reveals that the WTU is under serious pressure from rank-and-file educators. On January 29, the union met to discuss having members stage a sickout, on mental health grounds, to prevent a return to the classroom. A day later, the WTU passed a resolution calling on teachers to continue online-only instruction.

In a WTU press release issued Tuesday in response to the city's move for an injunction, the union says it “must continue to discuss ways to protect our health and that of our students. That could include a strike authorization vote later this week.”

In fact, the WTU has no intention of carrying out any strike action and offers no protection to the 1,800 teachers who have already been forced to return. At a press conference Tuesday, WTU President Elizabeth Davis stated that “WTU is advising its members who have been assigned in-person to return to their schools today. And of course, WTU has also advised members—as it continues to work with our partners—that a strike would be unlawful and will have serious negative consequences for them and for our union.”

On Tuesday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC), stated emphatically, “Let's be very clear: We are not trying to stand in the way of reopening.”

In its court filing, the D.C. government claims that without the injunction “its most vulnerable youth will suffer profound and irreparable harm.” In fact, keeping schools closed is the only way to ensure that children do not suffer the “profound and irreparable harm” of

getting sick or dying from COVID-19, or spreading the virus to their family members and throughout their communities.

D.C.'s filing also relied on a highly questionable January 26 article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* to support its reopening drive, stating that "the evidence does *not* support the conclusion that in-person learning in either the United States or abroad meaningfully contributed to increased community spread of COVID-19."

In fact, numerous studies have shown that schools are a major factor in transmissions of COVID-19 and that shutting them down is one of the most important public health measures to contain the pandemic.

D.C.'s own limited experience with reopening confirms that schools are vectors for the spread of the virus. In November, the school system opened what it called Canvas Academics and Real Engagement ("CARE") classrooms, allowing students to return to school buildings to receive online instruction while overseen by non-teaching staff.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

While the city reserved positions for up to 14,000 students in the CARE program, only about 900 enrolled, spread across 70 buildings. Despite this low attendance rate, D.C.'s own data reveals that K-12 school buildings have been the fifth largest source of outbreaks, with universities ranked just behind schools.

In response to the latest attack by a Democratic-run jurisdiction on teachers, a D.C. teacher responded that the city's actions were "not surprising. DCPS uses threats in every facet of teaching."

Another teacher, commenting on the law forbidding strikes of public employees, stated, "Anti-worker legislation has already made it illegal for teachers to strike in D.C., so the injunction can be seen as the mayor trying every method to antagonize workers when she knows we have the power to truly control our workplace no matter what legislation."

Teachers undoubtedly have the power to control their workplaces and stop school reopenings in Washington

D.C. and around the country. However, to do so they must unite their struggles with the growing nationwide rebellion of teachers, and break free from the isolation imposed by the unions.

The WTU, like the CTU in Chicago, is trying to wear down massive teacher opposition to school reopenings and will isolate any strike that does break out, just as the teachers unions did in the massive wave of teachers strike since 2018.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and our Educators Newsletter call on Washington D.C. teachers to join the growing Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the only organization fighting to unify teachers, students and parents with the broader working class across the US and internationally.

Such committees have already been formed in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, Pennsylvania, Texas, Tennessee, Alabama and a growing number of cities and states across the US, which are preparing for a nationwide general strike to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. To join this struggle, send us your contact information today!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact