

Pennsylvania rank-and-file committee stands with Chicago teachers

Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
5 February 2021

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee expresses its full support to the over 25,000 Chicago educators fighting against the deadly drive to resume in-person instruction in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Your fight is our fight! You are taking a stand on behalf of educators everywhere. We may face a concerted campaign by the Biden administration and the corporate media to force us into unsafe buildings for in-person teaching, but the opposition within the working class is growing and become more politically conscious.

Chicago teachers confront the Democratic Party at the local, state and national level—just as many Pennsylvania teachers do. Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot insists that students must return to face-to-face classes, in keeping with Biden’s pledge to reopen the majority of K-8 schools throughout the US by the end of April.

Despite the terrible toll among educators, children stricken with multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) and deaths throughout wider communities, school reopening is a central policy of the Democratic Party. Its purpose is to enable parents to put in more hours on the job in order to boost Wall Street profits.

In addition, teachers also confront the treachery of their own unions, which accept that schools should reopen and are negotiating to that end. The Chicago Teachers Union, (CTU) has been negotiating with CPS behind the backs of rank-and-file educators to cut a rotten deal which ensures that educators will be forced into unsafe classrooms. It is the same with the Pennsylvania State Educators Association (PSEA), the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and other unions throughout Pennsylvania.

Our committee has seen this all first-hand and knows the treachery of the unions and the role of the Democrats.

On Monday, Pennsylvania school bus driver Lynn Himes, an employee of Student Transportation of America, died from COVID-19. At least 30 other bus drivers and aides in the Perkiomen Valley School District, near Philadelphia, have also tested positive for the deadly virus.

The response of the school district has been to end busing—for one week! The fact that countless others were exposed to the virus has not even prompted the district to fully shut its doors. The Pennsylvania Department of Health is not even making the pretense of enforcing their bogus guidelines for school closures.

A similar outbreak took place last week in Hatboro-Horsham, a suburban Philadelphia district, when 20 employees had to be quarantined after a documented COVID-19 transmission. Again the schools are being kept open, but all bus operations were temporarily shut down.

In fact, school bus drivers in the region report that they have been provided only minimal protection from the virus and were told to self-report if they are sick. Officials encourage them to simply wear a mask, keep their windows open and run a fan, totally unscientific measures that do not protect them. At least 81 bus drivers have been killed by COVID-19 across the US, but the figure is undoubtedly much higher as the numbers are not comprehensively tracked.

Pennsylvania’s Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has been pushing for a return to classrooms since last summer. Last month, Wolf ordered that K-5 classes resume immediately, ignoring earlier recommendations made by the administration. By this time, most of Pennsylvania’s patchwork of 500 separate school

districts were already opened.

With Biden's inauguration, there is now a concerted push to resume in-person teaching in the largest districts in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and especially Philadelphia with its 200,000 students. Philadelphia schools have demanded some 2,000 educators who teach pre-kindergarten through second grade report to schools on Monday, February 8. Classrooms are set to reopen on February 22, with older grades being phased in thereafter.

For his part, PFT President Jerry Jordan, like the CTU leadership, is highly aware of the growing anger of teachers. He announced that a third-party expert on ventilation and airflow would inspect buildings this weekend, and on Friday encouraged teachers not to return to their classrooms. However, no preparations are being made for strike action or collective resistance, much less linking up the struggle of Philadelphia teachers with those in Chicago and nationally.

District Superintendent William Hite has dismissed Jordan's professed concerns, stating adamantly, "We don't have a thought of prolonging it [all virtual-learning] and we're moving forward." On Friday, Chief Talent Officer Larisa Shambaugh threatened teachers in an email, writing, "If you are expected to be in your building on Monday and choose not to do so, you will be subject to disciplinary action."

The struggle unfolding in Chicago must become the spearhead of a broader movement of the entire working class. We call for a nationwide political general strike to demand the end of face-to-face instruction and the shutdown of nonessential production. We also demand full income protection for all workers and families until the pandemic is ended.

There are powerful forces on the side of the teachers in the millions-strong working class, which is seeking to find a way to fight this pandemic and defend their living standards. This movement will only be successful if it is completely independent of both big business parties and the unions which they control.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, along with our sister committees throughout the US and internationally are spearheading this political struggle. We base ourselves on the power of the working class and on science. There is no "safe" return to school when the pandemic is totally out of control and has entered a new and deadlier phase.

On Thursday, the Philadelphia-based consumer advocacy group PennPIRG announced that Pennsylvania has earned an "F" for their COVID-19 testing efforts, needing to do 15 times as much testing as it is currently doing to help contain the virus.

Since the mass reopening of schools in September, the number of cases and deaths in the US has skyrocketed. In Pennsylvania, the case total has climbed from roughly 135,000 on September 1 to over 850,000 cases today. The number of those who have died from COVID-19 during the same period has shot up from 7,700 to nearly 22,000.

The campaign to reopen schools is all the more criminal now, under conditions where the more infectious UK and South African variants of COVID-19 are spreading largely undetected throughout the US.

The fight against the murderous back-to-school policy of the ruling class and the refusal to close nonessential businesses until the pandemic is brought under control pits teachers and all workers against the entire political and economic system. The pandemic has brought to the surface and exacerbated the enormous social chasm between the rich and the working class, which has been growing for decades.

There are no good reasons to force teachers, bus drivers and other educators to risk their lives and die while the rich continue to profit in the billions from this pandemic!

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-corporate unions. Our committees are discussing and preparing for a nationwide 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. We urge educators everywhere to join our ranks and take up this fight in unity with educators in Chicago, throughout the US and globally!



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