

Philadelphia educators to defy district, maintain all-virtual schooling Monday

Douglas Lyons, Samuel Davidson
8 February 2021

Thousands of Philadelphia public school teachers are set to defy their district's order to return to classrooms Monday. They will instead work virtually. This week marks the third attempt by the school district of Philadelphia to reopen school buildings in the midst of the pandemic. The district has been remote-only since last March.

District officials demanded that approximately 2,000 kindergarten through second-grade teachers prepare classrooms beginning February 8 so that students could return on February 22. Nine thousand students are scheduled to enter buildings first, with further grades phased in later.

Following the policies of Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and the Biden administration, the district is issuing threats, lies and trying to browbeat teachers into acquiescing to its demands. "If you are expected to be in your building on Monday and choose not to do so, you will be subject to disciplinary action," announced Chief Talent Officer Larisa Shambaugh. In a letter to principals sent Friday, Superintendent William Hite reiterated the threat.

Under tremendous pressure from educators, parents and students, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) has sanctioned the one-day action. After pronouncing that in-school learning is best and claiming that a neutral party walk-through over the weekend would ensure safe schools, PFT President Jerry Jordan has now backtracked and urged teachers to defy the district.

Behind the district's vindictiveness and the collusion of the union is their mutual fear that the teachers will link up their struggle with teachers in Chicago and those across the country who are mobilizing against the homicidal return to face-to-face instruction.

The Democratic Party has made reopening schools, in their effort to force workers back into unsafe jobs, the first priority of the new administration. For their part, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) are working frantically behind the scenes with the Democrats to undermine this growing resistance. To this end, their respective national presidents, Randi Weingarten and Becky Pringle, met with the new administration on Biden's first day in office. Just as in 2018-19, the two national unions are doing everything in their power to prevent teachers struggles from expanding across district, state and national boundaries despite the universality of their fight.

Trying to cover up the union's long partnership with the district, PFT officials have reluctantly authorized the one-day action. This

measure not only serves to limit and isolate Philly teachers, but sets them up for possible victimization by the district. This can only be stopped if Philadelphia teachers reach out to the broadest sections of workers in the city whose lives are also being sacrificed for profit.

The science is clear. Schools and nonessential workplaces must remain closed until the pandemic is contained and all workers must stand together! This is the policy fought for the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees .

Trying belatedly to feign militancy, Jordan admitted late last week that the district's claims of safety—based on the purchase of window fans—was laughable. "Entire schools have maximum occupancy of zero, according to air balancing reports. We have repeatedly asked for real, concrete solutions, and instead have been presented with a dangerous window-fan installation program that further jeopardizes the health and safety of our educators and young people."

The union came to this conclusion following a reportedly raucous meeting with 300 building representatives and a school board meeting attended by angry parents, students and teachers.

Jeanine Fennal, a 13-year veteran educator who teaches first grade at Benjamin B. Comegys Elementary, told the *Philly Tribune*, "No, I'm not going. I feel disrespected that the district would even think about bringing us back, knowing that the schools were in a disarray before the pandemic. ... The school buildings contribute to your health. Since we've been home, my daughter hasn't been sick since April of last year."

Public opposition to reopening has also been intense. Superintendent Hite's reopening plan was passed at a January 28 school board in which comments from parents and teachers were deliberately limited. According to WHYY radio, most public speakers including students who were against the reopening plans were cut off midsentence.

Sonya Rosen, a parent, however, spoke for many. She said, "If you allow schools to reopen for in-person learning before all adults can be vaccinated, we will hold you accountable for when this decision will inevitably result in illnesses, deaths and community spread. Instead of investing in reopening buildings for thousands of unvaccinated people, the SDP should invest in supporting the hard work teachers have done all year to create dynamic online learning environments for our students."

The most recent poll of parents in the district showed only one-third intend to send their children to in-person classes. Meanwhile,

city health officials admitted that the chaotic rollout of the vaccine means that school employees likely will not be fully vaccinated until at least April or May.

Superintendent Hite is attempting to palm off a paltry \$4 million renovation to the subpar ventilation system with a gimmick purchase of 1,100 box fans, found at any big-box retailer, to bolster his return-to-work order. He even claimed this sham was a “good-faith effort.” Jerry Roseman, an environmental scientist and an expert on school ventilation systems, drily noted that “the use of the fans selected by the district is not a best practice in the school situation” since the airflow is not regulated or controlled by the fans “to undercut pathogens.”

This is the same school district that has ignored catastrophic environmental issues, like asbestos and lead paint and botched a \$50 million construction project at Benjamin Franklin High School. Students and educators at the high school became ill, forcing its closure for over a month. Some school buildings in the district are over a century old and are crumbling.

Members of the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Educators Safety Committee in the Philadelphia area spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their support for the actions of Philadelphia and Chicago Public School teachers. They called for general strike action across the country to demand the shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses.

“I’m against the reopening of schools in Philadelphia,” said a bus driver. “It’s just like New York. They are trying to get these very large school districts to reopen so that they can get everybody back to work. It is a very bad time with the different variants coming up. It is a very dangerous time. People seem to be having a lot of problems getting the vaccines, getting the shots. There is all kinds of confusion about where to go and when.

“As bus drivers, we have to deal with the possibility of contracting COVID daily because the safety protocols are not that effective. I’m just totally against it. It is a move to get all the schools back so they can get people back to work for profits.”

The bus driver then warned teachers, “The unions shouldn’t be trusted to lead this fight. My union is worthless. I pay all these union dues, and they don’t do anything. They have outsourced our jobs. I wouldn’t trust them. Teachers shouldn’t trust them. They will say one thing and do another.”

A Philly charter school math teacher said, “To my dismay, I have watched really no protection for students, educators and households from the Democrats or the teachers unions, but only from the leadership of frontline educators committed to saving lives! This is from the rank-and-file committees that I have observed and the teachers in Chicago and in other cities that have gone on strike. They have done this with no DNC [Democratic National Committee] or union support but with their opposition!

“It is horrific that amidst continuing very high numbers, somewhat of a decrease the last time I looked, but still huge numbers that they would start in-person learning. Mixed within the high numbers and due to the very lax testing, there is an unknown and nevertheless pervasive inclusion of new strains [of the virus]. In this situation, returning is utterly counterintuitive and diametrically opposed to the needs of public safety, especially for students, families and staff in low-income schools where

ventilation is decrepit.

“This is not only endangering people involved in Philadelphia but setting up tens of thousands of superspreader events nationwide. I almost want to attribute this to a herd immunity perspective.”

Indeed! Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has stated one of his chief concerns for the year is to reopen schools for all elementary school children, in line with President Biden’s demand that all K-8 schools open by the end of April. In fact, Biden picked Wolf’s former health secretary to provide a pseudo-scientific cover for herd immunity.

Despite an overwhelming majority of Pennsylvania counties in the “substantial spread” category for COVID, the majority of the state’s 500 separate school districts have remained opened. The state has over 870,000 cases and over 22,000 deaths, and Philadelphia County is the leader in cases and deaths.

In the face of a more contagious and deadlier variant of the virus rapidly spreading throughout the United States, the actions of the Philadelphia and Chicago school districts are even more criminal. There is popular support for educators, but PFT President Jordan is working overtime to defuse the situation, knowing full well that rank-and-file educators are just as determined in Philadelphia as they are in Chicago.

For teachers, maintaining remote-only learning and protecting lives are nonnegotiable. The PFT has agreed to send teachers to dangerous schools without the mandate of teachers, which are widely opposed to such a murderous policy. This underscores the need for Philadelphia teachers to join the national and international network of rank-and-file safety committees to take the conduct of this fight into their own hands.

Philadelphia educators must reach out to the working class—Chicago teachers, autoworkers, Amazon workers, steelworkers—to launch a political general strike to shut down schools and nonessential production and guarantee full compensation to all workers until the pandemic is eradicated! We urge teachers to join and build the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact