

Defying medical science and workers' opposition, Dutch state reopens schools

Harm Zonderland
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The Dutch government has mandated primary schools reopen their doors on February 8 and the easing of other lockdown restrictions. The curfew, which set off far-right protests, remains in force and may be extended. However, the Dutch Security Council, an assembly of mayors, stated through their chairman, Tilburg Mayor Hubert Bruls, that if the curfew is lifted, it should not be reimposed.

While mainstream media zealously pushes illusions that schools can be opened safely, governments across Europe and internationally are demanding schools be reopened even as evidence mounts that schools are key vectors in spreading COVID-19. Recent studies show that school closures reduced the spread of the virus in the United States. UK studies show that children are more susceptible to the so-called British variant and spread it more rapidly.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had to admit that the “problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

In the Netherlands, data from an outbreak of the British variant at a school in Lansingerland shows children spread the virus to their families in 17.9 percent of researched cases, against 5.6 percent for the “regular” virus. On February 3, Dutch communal health services (GGD) reported 4,060 confirmed cases and 205 hospitalizations.

While the government’s advisory board *Outbreak Management Team* (OMT) calls reopening schools a “real risk,” it advises not to keep schools closed, but to implement social distancing and supply “quick tests” to schools. Health Minister Hugo de Jonge also called school reopenings a risk, but he “think[s] the health care system can handle it.”

In fact, the Dutch health care system hangs by a

thread. After decades of privatization and austerity, which led to the closure of five “bankrupt” hospitals in 2018, thousands of planned surgeries were canceled due to the pandemic. Public health examinations for cancer were cancelled in 2020 for the same reason, meaning that tens of thousands of people will likely develop cancer because of missing early treatment.

There is broad resistance among the international working class against the premature reopening of schools in the US, Brazil, UK, Germany, the Netherlands and beyond. US teachers in Chicago are striking against the school reopening. The United States has seen more than 26 million infections and suffered over 440,000 casualties. The Chicago Teachers Union negotiated with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot for the reopenings as more than 10,000 teachers are breaking with the unions and organizing strikes themselves.

Everywhere, unions do everything they can to downplay and isolate strikes and force workers back to work. The Dutch *Algemene Onderwijsbond* (AOB), the largest teachers union, affiliated to the FNV (Federation of Dutch Trade Unions, the largest Dutch union federation), is at most sheepish as it follows the state’s dictates. An AOB spokesperson told *RTL Nieuws*, “Why can they not wait until the advice is completely pieced together, so that everybody can read which measures are necessary for children and teachers?”

Despite growing resistance among teachers, AOB claims that “most school workers would rather want the schools to be able to reopen.” In a recent article, the state-funded news outlet *NOS Nieuws* shows a twitter post from a concerned husband of a primary school teacher, saying: “She will strike. [...] Unions: idea perhaps? Strike for safety?” He also pointed to the government ignoring medical advice and said that

education workers are “thrown into the fray unvaccinated.”

An online petition demanding schools open only after all school workers received vaccines has more than 31,000 signatures in four days. The petitioners point to the already severe personnel shortage and high workload in the schools. This makes replacing sick teachers nearly impossible.

The social crisis now unfolding in the Netherlands has been brewing for decades but erupted to the surface due to the government’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government’s malign neglect of public health and treatment of the pandemic as a financial rather than health care crisis have intensified deep class tensions.

Unemployment has risen sharply, especially among flex workers and youth. The housing shortage, combined with student debt, makes it almost impossible for youth to find a place to live. More than 150,000 people rely on food banks for daily sustenance. One million people live in poverty, 250,000 of them are children, while the richest 10 percent saw their wealth increase by billions of euros.

The trade unions in the Netherlands are not working for the working class but against them. They give bogus reasons to justify rejecting members’ calls for strikes, arguing that the pandemic or lack of funds makes it impossible to strike.

This underscores the necessity, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, for workers globally to build their own organizations, rank-and-file safety committees, for an internationally coordinated struggle against the pandemic and against school reopening policies. Independent organization and an international, socialist perspective are critical to mount a struggle. The trade unions, for their part, act like police enforcing state and corporate dictates on the working class.

The rank-and-file education safety committees in Germany and the UK have adopted a statement of solidarity with the protesting teachers in Chicago. Expressing their support and solidarity, the statement concisely explains the reasons behind the school reopening push: “The reason for this is clear to us: schools are being used as holding pens for children, and teachers are being employed as babysitters in unsafe conditions, so that parents can be forced to return to

work and corporate profits can be maintained throughout the pandemic.”

Furthermore, the rank-and-file education safety committees point to the treacherous role of the trade unions in France and the UK. Only when teachers started taking matters into their own hands did the unions call for school closure, in order to prevent broader strikes they could not control.

The entire Dutch ruling class and political establishment—most prominently the far-right Forum for Democracy (FvD)—are pushing a policy of herd-immunity, allowing the virus to spread with as few containment measures as possible, in order to keep profits flowing to the banks. The way forward for workers in the Netherlands and internationally is in advancing a socialist program, placing human life above economics and the ruthless policies of the capitalist class.



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