

Thousands of Philadelphia teachers protest, delaying plans to restart in-person schooling

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7:30pm EST Thursday night, Feb. 11, to discuss the developments in Philadelphia and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee! All teachers, support staff and supporters should join the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

Thousands of Philadelphia teachers and support staff protested across the city on Monday and educators are continuing to teach remotely after defying efforts by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and Democratic Party city officials to restart in-person schooling.

Some 2,000 pre-K through second-grade teachers were due to report to school buildings on Monday as part of a plan approved by the PFT to bring in 9,000 students in these grades by February 22, followed by older students. Facing mass opposition from rank-and-file teachers, PFT President Jerry Jordan announced over the weekend that educators could continue remote-only instruction and the city had to back down from any threats to take disciplinary action.

Philadelphia is the 18th largest school district in the US with over 132,000 public school students and 11,000 teachers and support staff. The current seven-day average of daily COVID infections is 3,827 in Philadelphia County, which has seen 113,000 total cases and 2,978 deaths, as of this writing.

On Monday, thousands of educators, families, and students, in a remarkable show of working-class solidarity, battled below-freezing temperatures to protest the district's deadly demand to reopen schools unsafely for the third time.

Protesters demanded safe buildings and vaccinations

and expressed their determination to save the lives of teachers, students and the working class communities they serve in the city of 1.6 million residents. Educators mocked School Superintendent William Hite Jr.'s plan to install window fans to stop the spread of the disease inside classrooms.

As teachers simultaneously pitched tents to teach their students remotely, they held signs and placards that read, "Teaching outside until it is safe Inside," "Plans not Fans, Keep Students Safe," "Not a Fan of Hite's Plan," and "We love our students too much to put them at risk for Covid" in English and Spanish. Other signs said, "Our Teachers, Students, and Families Deserve Safe Schools" and "Cancer did not kill me. I will not let SDP."

Like Chicago, Washington D.C., Los Angeles and other large cities, the Democrats in Philadelphia are leading the drive to send children back to school in order to get their parents back to work producing profits. This is being backed by the Biden administration and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and its state and local affiliates.

While relying on the PFT to herd teachers and students back into unsafe schools, Mayor Jim Kenney dropped a hint of other methods being considered if teachers continue to resist. "You're not going to be able to force people to go to work, especially in this environment. What are we going to do? Send the police out to pick them up and take them to the classroom?"

Kenney has agreed to the union's proposal for the intervention of a mediator and, similar to the wording in the sellout deal agreed to by the Chicago Teachers Union, made vague promises about vaccinating teachers. Like other cities, Philadelphia is facing a shortage of vaccines and in any case unvaccinated students would still be able to infect each other and their

families.

“We agreed to do a mediator, which we’re doing,” Kenney said. “That’s the process we’re following. In the meantime, we’re getting CHOP [Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia] to vaccinate people. I believe starting on the 22nd, try to get everybody a level of comfort and not do it in a contentious way,” the mayor said, sticking to the district’s original timeline.

The PFT has promoted the lie that schools can be safely reopened, agreeing to a Memorandum of Agreement on supposed stipulations and metrics needed to be met to bully teachers and students back to school.

In a message on Monday, Superintendent Hite said the district had met and gone beyond the six-point requirements the PFT bureaucrats had requested at the bargaining table.

Ignoring the science, the PFT has continued cordial talks to reopen schools as quickly as possible, each time being met with stiff resistance from the rank and file. Educators, parents, and students admonished the union-backed reopening policy at a boisterous PFT meeting attended over 300 people last week.

A Philadelphia parent speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* denounced both the district and the union, saying “I really cannot trust you with my children’s health and safety. Your word is not good enough for me.”

On Monday morning, Jordan postured as a defender of educators, despite being in backroom negotiations for months to reopen schools. Accompanied by union bureaucrats and local Democratic and city council politicians at Samuel Gompers Elementary School in Wynnefield, Jordan said, “The lives of our students and our educators are at stake.” The reopening plan “is obscene, and it’s cruel,” referring to the ersatz ventilation plans.

Like two peas in a pod, AFT President Randi Weingarten criticized the ventilation plans, yet she has been a vigilant promoter in the reopening of schools since last summer, advocating pseudo-scientific rationalizations and working with the Biden administration to open all K-8 schools by April.

Instead of linking the struggle of teachers with their class brothers and sisters across the nation and globe, Jordan is banking on a mediator to provide a spurious justification to reopen schools. The City of Philadelphia

has appointed Peter Orris, a Chicago-based doctor, to decide on the safety recommendations agreed upon between the PFT and district, which is expected soon.

The opposition of Philadelphia educators is part of the growing national and international resistance of educators to the deadly return to schools. This includes the opposition of educators in Chicago and the powerful strike by more than 200,000 teachers in São Paulo, Brazil, the largest school district in the Americas. But the bitter experience of teachers in Chicago demonstrates that the biggest obstacle to mobilizing the working class is the unions, which defend the profit system and support Biden and the Democrats.

The most pressing issue for Philadelphia educators is joining the growing national network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which is uniting and mobilizing the strength of educators, independently of the unions, to fight to save lives, including the preparation of a political general strike. Educators, parents, and students should attend the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Thursday for a genuine working class perspective and strategy moving forward.



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