

“We are being abandoned by our union and being led to the slaughter by our school system”

Teachers from Maryland’s Eastern Shore speak out against school reopenings

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Three teachers from the Eastern Shore of Maryland recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter* about the reopening of schools and their reasons for joining the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Their names have been changed to protect them from retaliation by both their school system and union.

The Eastern Shore, separated by the Chesapeake Bay from the more populous Baltimore-Washington D.C. metropolitan region, is mostly rural. The major economic activity of the region includes: farming, especially large-scale chicken farms for the area’s many chicken processing plants; fishing, especially for shellfish along the Bay and its tributaries; and in the warmer months, tourism centered on the Atlantic coast beach resort town of Ocean City.

The region is significantly poorer than the rest of the state. In 2019, the median household income in Maryland was \$84,805. In Somerset County, the poorest county on the Eastern Shore, the median household income was only \$37,803.

Barbara, one of the teachers interviewed, explained that in her school there were already numerous positive COVID-19 cases even before schools reopened for students on February 8. The week prior, teachers had returned for three days to prepare for the reopening. In this time, four teachers, an assistant principal and an intern tested positive.

All three teachers report that safety measures and personal protective equipment have been meager. “Custodial staff are very upset at our school,” Barbara reported. “One of them says she cries everyday about having to come to work. Multiple [custodians] have said that they received no training on how to deep clean. Just a link to a video.”

The teachers are also expected to wipe down student desks with a cleaning chemical after every class change. “My school is considering these cleaning chemicals as PPE,” Teresa explained. “I had to buy my own mask, I had to buy my own face shield. If I wanted to get a shield on my desk, I’d have to purchase that for myself. We’re not being given gloves, hospital gowns.”

In addition to the chemicals, the only other “safety” supplies that Teresa has been provided by her school system is painter’s tape to make marks on the floor for students to follow social distancing. When she explained to her union that she was not being provided PPE, the union representative told her to ask the Board of Education for a mask. “That’s not providing PPE,” Teresa noted, “That’s saying ‘if you need it, request it and it will maybe be provided to you.’

Providing would be: ‘here’s your box of masks for the week.’ That’s not at all what they’re doing.”

Teresa noted that with the added responsibilities of trying to make classrooms safe, including spending time cleaning, “We’re actually reducing the instruction that we’re giving in order to do what I call ‘hygiene theater:’ pretend that we’re doing something about COVID by spraying chemicals on it.”

Along the same lines, Mark explained that in “teaching at home, virtual, our main focus is teaching and now going back to school, my main focus is my health and the health of my family. That’s number 1. Item number 2 is teaching and educating. It’s still going to be the same basic lessons. Normally when you teach your main focus is on teaching. But now it’s more like ‘well, where are these kids? Gotta be distant. Can’t get too close to the other teachers.’ There’s just a whole other concern that is more important [than teaching].”

“Hybrid is virtual for us. Instead of kids sitting in their home, they’re going to sit in a classroom,” Barbara added. “The education will be worse, though, because instead of just speaking freely into the camera where they can see my face, I have a mask on, I’m going to have a face shield on, I have to wear headphones. I literally look like an astronaut. It’s weird, it’s scary looking. So that part is going to get worse for 95 kids because of these ten [returning to school buildings].”

All three teachers reported that the vast majority of students are not returning for in-person learning. Those who are returning are generally from wealthier families. Despite claims by both Democratic and Republican politicians that they are opening up schools for “those falling behind,” especially minority and special education children, it is the working class that is the most resistant to sending their kids back in the midst of the pandemic.

Teresa said: “I don’t know where this ‘Parents have spoken’ farce has come from. I did read that the Biden administration’s big push is that ‘this is what parents need, this is what black and brown students need.’ But then I also read that they don’t have any documentation of any of this. They don’t have any studies, any data that shows who needs school [or] who’s failing.”

The demographics of those returning to Mark’s school are similar. “My school is a more rural school. Being rural, it’s in a more conservative area. There’s a slightly larger percentage of students coming in. Of all the kids that have either IEPs [for special education students] or 504s, most of them are staying home. All the kids that are

minorities, most of them are staying home.”

“Everything that they’re talking about: the learning loss, impacting minorities and the special ed ‘they’re going to fall behind,’ when I look at my situation, and it sounds like Teresa’s and Barbara’s are very similar...That’s not really the case. It’s sort of the middle class parents, the ones who are on social media all the time, probably, who are saying ‘open the schools, open the schools, open the schools.’ That’s who we’re really opening it for.”

The school buildings and classrooms to which the teachers are returning to are also not adhering to the most basic public health measures. “We already have a history of issues with our old school that’s never really clean,” Teresa said. “They say they’ve deep cleaned the school for months and months. I went in. It was no different. It had not been cleaned. But what they did do was polish the floors. I don’t think there’s any science that shows that having shiny floors reduces the risk of COVID in a building.”

“We’re not allowed to move our desks to be by a window,” Mark added. “My room doesn’t have any windows. There’s a door you have to keep shut for protection. When I walked into my room this past week, my school had sort of spaced out the desks already, [supposedly] six feet apart. I went and measured, and they were only four feet apart. And then I walked around the school and looked, all the desks are four feet apart. Luckily, I was able to move my desks and actually space them six feet apart. But even something like that, the desks aren’t six feet apart, they’re only four feet apart, but they’re saying they’re six feet apart.”

To force the reopening of schools, many school systems across the country claim they have made upgrades to HVAC systems. “I’ve also been told that they updated or cleaned the HVAC, but the teachers aren’t given any real documentation of this,” Teresa explained. “My school, right before COVID, right before the shutdown, we actually had to evacuate our school because there was a putrid smell coming through our HVAC.”

When asked about the role of the Democratic Party in the current wave of nationwide school openings, Barbara noted, “Biden’s the one sending us back.”

“There’s one party. It’s the business party,” Teresa added. “I don’t really see the big difference between Trump and presidents before him. Yes, his rhetoric was horrific. He was more blatant about it in many ways. As far as education goes, it’s just the same. They’ve been threatening funding from educators no matter what administration.”

After Biden was elected, the teachers thought the schools would remain closed as long as the science showed that this was necessary. Barbara said, “I’m actually pretty shocked. I was pretty shocked that [Maryland Governor] Hogan went on and said, ‘open up the schools right now.’ I didn’t see it coming. I thought we were all scientific and metrics-based here.”

On January 21, the day after Biden was inaugurated, Governor Hogan held a press conference calling on all school systems statewide to open by March 1 and threatened action against teachers who didn’t return. Hogan pointed to Chicago, where the city cut off the pay for teachers who did not return to schools, and South Carolina, where the state threatened to take away educators’ teaching licenses for the same reason. “If school systems don’t immediately begin a good faith effort [to reopen] we will explore every legal avenue at our disposal,” Hogan said.

Mark explained that prior to Biden’s inauguration, “We were following scientific metrics. [In] our county, we were so proud...We had hard data that we were gonna use and the Governor had in the past

had been kind of threatening, you know, sort of thinly veiled, but as soon as Biden gets elected, talks about opening schools.”

Mark continued, “Our governor [now] says ‘the science is clear. No one has been getting an education for months. I demand the schools to be open by a certain date.’ Just like that, bam, all of the metrics go by the wayside. All of a sudden it was never about metrics anyway. There’s a whole new story being told about this. It’s really shocking how quickly everything sort of fell. I wasn’t expecting that. I’m looking at the metrics, thinking ‘okay they might be going down, maybe some time by the spring,’ not a couple of days after Biden’s inauguration.”

Mark pointed to the hypocrisy of Hogan pretending to care about the education of working class children, “With Governor Hogan, this person’s entire career as a politician has been to strip away public schools, fund them less. He vetoed this big bill in Maryland that was gonna provide hundreds of millions or billions of more dollars for schools. He just vetoed that last year. He’s big on school choice. He wants to take public taxpayer money and give it to private schools. And all of a sudden, he’s the big school champion who cares about the minority students who supposedly aren’t getting a great education. Wow, what a hero he is. Literally his entire career he’s been fighting to dismantle public schools.”

When asked about the approach of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which calls for teachers to unite with the broader working class and with teachers across the country and internationally to prepare for a general strike, Mark said, “I think that it’s necessary because when this came down in Maryland, when the Governor gave his incendiary speech about opening schools and kind of blaming the teachers, I thought, ‘Our unions will really hit them back hard. There will be some kind of resistance’ and it was just vanilla: a politely worded letter...Our local union they seemed to talk a lot; seemed like they were trying to do something but basically all that we’re doing is ‘hey, on Monday, the first day that kids come back, let’s all wear red shirts.’”

Mark continued, “I was thinking ‘Are they going to call for a sickout or something, anything?’ And it’s come down to: ‘we disagree and wear a red shirt.’ I’ve always been a big supporter of unions. Obviously, I’m a member of one. But this is really eye opening. I just feel like they’ve all just sort of accepted this and they’re not trying to do anything.”

“I think this thing is going to be eye opening,” Barbara said. “Being abandoned by our union and being led to the slaughter by our school system. I think this is going to be eye opening for a lot of people. And it’s like, yeah, you’re taking a risk if we take direct action but there’s also the risk of going to school and catching COVID so it’s a risk either way and one way we’re being led to the slaughter and another we’re going down swinging...I feel [a strike] could happen here.”

“These rank and file organizations are essential because they are the only place,” Teresa added. “This is the first conversation I’ve had that is actually meaningful. We have an objective. We want to get somewhere.”



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