

# Philadelphia Teachers Union promotes pseudo-science as it prepares deal to open schools

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As the February 22 deadline for students and teachers to return to unsafe classrooms approaches, the Philadelphia Teachers Union (PFT) is waiting on a “scientific mediator” to provide a justification to reopen schools as new variants of COVID spread throughout the population and the US approaches ghastly milestone of half a million deaths.

Since last summer, Jerry Jordan, president of the PFT, has been in negotiations with the School District of Philadelphia to reopen schools. During the fall, both sides agreed to a Memorandum of Agreement in which the first paragraph states that both the school district and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers “recognize the goal of reopening school buildings for student instruction.” At the time, cases around the US had been rising rapidly as schools across the country started to reopen.

The PFT is hoping to stymie any opposition from educators by giving their reopening plan a “scientific” facelift. This is aimed at breaking the resistance of rank-and-file educators and parents who have compelled the district to backpedal in reopening several times already.

The fraud that schools can be reopened safely is epitomized in the fact that the mediator will not be setting foot into any classroom but will analyze documentation from both sides to assess how safe the schools really are. The end goal is a complete reopening of the schools. Those specific school buildings deemed “unsafe” will be fixed with rudimentary fans to ensure children and teachers are back in school so parents can return to work in order to accumulate profit for the banks and Wall Street.

Dr. Peter Orris, who is acting as the mediator, is a professor and Chief Occupational and Environmental

Medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago Hospital and Health Sciences System. Along with a Pennsylvania state mediator involved, a decision will be made noting the efficacy of the safety of schools based on ventilation and other basic measures this month.

To buttress the plan worked out behind the backs of educators, Susan E. Coffin, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia physician and infectious disease specialist, joined superintendent Hite in a public meeting advocating for reopening. “It is possible to have an in-person education during this period,” she said, as long as, among other safety precautions, “staff and students stay home if they’re feeling ill or have known exposures to COVID.” One should ask this politically-motivated doctor: what would be the result if asymptomatic children or teachers are in schools, which act as vectors for the virus?

Hite insisted that the reopening plan is not predicated on educators getting the vaccine *before* schools reopen. One report noted that educators will not be fully vaccinated until April or May, and children have no timetable set for inoculation.

Doctors Coffin and Orris are joining the recent media barrage by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other media outlets on new CDC guidelines falsely arguing that schools are somehow now safe. This is despite the fact that 99 percent of all children in the US live within zones, classified by the CDC, as red. If citywide positivity rates reach 70, 80 or even 100 percent, according to the logic of the CDC, school doors can still remain open.

Jordan, for his part, has warmly praised the new CDC guidelines, saying “We’re encouraged by the new

guidance because it recognizes the need for a multilayered approach to mitigation.” Speaking out of both sides of his mouth, he continued, “We’re not going to speculate right now on when district schools will be safe for re-occupancy.”

But educators and the community are seeking to fight back against the deadly drive to reopen schools.

One Philadelphia teacher, commenting on social media, said, “If such a small percentage signed up to send their children back, then the people have spoken, Stay virtual! Why risk the lives of so many! When I saw how the classrooms are supposed to look due to COVID, all I could envision is how those classrooms will look within a few days, and it was not good; that plexiglass will not stand and/or be sanitary and do they expect custodians to be exposed to those rooms? Oh no!!” Most parents have elected to keep their children home until it is safe, in solidarity with educators.

A Philadelphia-area educator, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, castigated the role her union in their behind-the-scenes negotiations. “I was a building representative in the union for 10 years until I finally had to walk away because I became disillusioned by what I saw on the inside and could no longer serve in good conscience. All of that became amplified this summer as our leadership negotiated our return to buildings with little to no input from membership. We have had one bus driver die from COVID last fall and multiple hospitalizations.”

The PFT bureaucracy is deeply afraid of any oppositional movement against the union, breaking free of their chokehold and linking the fight with educators and workers across the US and the globe.

Across the US, the unions have been in league with politicians of all shades to reopen. In Chicago, the Chicago Teachers Union has bargained away the lives of teachers, reaching an agreement with the Chicago Public Schools to reopen. Resistant educators had been locked out of their online accounts and denied pay by the Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, while the CTU refused to call a strike, despite massive support.

Likewise, Jordan is terrified of rank-and-file membership launching a strike, saying last week, “This union went on strike for 12 weeks in 1972. We went on strike for 50 days in 1981. So, I don’t hope that happens. I hope cooler heads prevail.” In other words, every tactic will be used to guarantee that schools

reopen, following President Biden’s initiative since taking office in January.

To stop the PFT, district, and Democratic officials from imposing a deal that amounts to a death certificate for teachers and the community, educators should join the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed independently of the unions, to mobilize the working class to close schools and nonessential workplaces to save lives. We urge you to register for the next meeting of the committee this Thursday, February 18 at 7:30 pm EST.



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