

Philadelphia postpones public school reopenings to March 1

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7:30pm EST Thursday night, Feb. 18, to discuss the unfolding struggle in Philadelphia and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee!

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) announced yesterday it was pushing back its reopening of schools for in-person instruction from February 22 to March 1. The district had originally planned for a phased reopening to begin next Monday, beginning with 9,000 kindergarten through second grade students.

District Superintendent William Hite told a press conference, "I believe we all agree on reopening schools. The dispute has been how can we do that safely, and the district needs to address that." Feigning concern for the mental and educational well-being of children, he continued, "our youngest students are falling further behind," without providing a shred of evidence to back up this claim.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) union issued a perfunctory statement in response, saying it is the "right decision" and that the PFT will work with the district to reopen schools based on the fraudulent claim that buildings can be made safe by adding a box fan for adequate ventilation.

The delay is the third time that school reopenings have been postponed this semester in the city, which has been virtual-only since last March, because of the overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file teachers. They compelled the union to call a job action on February 8, a previous return date, with teachers continuing to hold classes remotely.

However, the PFT supports plans to reopen schools in the midst of the pandemic. Both the union and the district have endorsed the politically motivated rewrite

of school guidelines by the Biden administration's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which allows for schools to reopen "at any level of community transmission," falsely claiming that schools reopenings can be safe.

Hite has paraded his own scientist out into the public forum to hurl unscientific platitudes at the public. Susan E. Coffin, a Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) physician and infectious disease specialist, said, "It is possible to have an in-person education during this period," suggesting only that children and staff should "stay home if they're feeling ill"—a precaution which would not affect asymptomatic infections, as the vast majority of infections among children are.

Union President Jerry Jordan signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the school district last fall as a framework for reopening the city's schools. The agreement provides for disputes over safety measures to be resolved by an "independent" mediator, in discussions which take place behind closed doors and are not subject to the membership's approval. In reality, this is a framework for the union to collude with the school district to beat back the opposition of teachers.

The decision to push back reopening is an indication that both the PFT and the school district recognize they need more time to bring the opposition of teachers under control. For now, wary of further inflaming opposition, city officials are not moving openly against teachers. In a press conference Tuesday, before the delay had been announced, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney ruled out disciplinary action against teachers who refused to return to classrooms.

"We've all been through a lot within the last year, and everybody is scared, everybody is stressed,"

Kenney said. "And you're more likely to add to that stress by disciplining people. I don't think that gets us anywhere and maybe forebodes a longer term problem with managing staff personnel." Last Sunday, several dozen teachers and parents staged a Valentine's Day demonstration outside of Kenney's house, demanding that schools remain closed.

However, this measured approach can change rapidly. This is because the reopening of schools is a central strategic goal of the entire ruling class, who see as critical the reopening of workplaces and dismantling all remaining limitations on economic activity. While it is deeply unpopular among teachers and the working class, it enjoys unanimous bipartisan support, and the Biden administration has identified reopening schools by April as its top priority.

Philadelphia teachers must learn the lessons of the Chicago teachers struggle, where the union and Mayor Lori Lightfoot used delays to string out teachers and lull them into a false sense of security. On the eve of lockouts and near-certain strike action, the union then announced a deal which accepted all of Lightfoot's demands, and forced it through last week within 48 hours.

Teachers cannot allow the PFT-SDP conspiracy to go unchallenged! To mobilize their co-workers and their supporters in the working class, teachers should join the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is completely independent of the pro-corporate trade unions, and was formed last year in opposition to unsafe school reopenings.

The Pennsylvania committee is part of a rapidly growing network of committees throughout the United States and worldwide, which fights to mobilize workers independently to fight for a shutdown of schools and nonessential industry to contain the pandemic and defeat the "herd immunity" policies of the capitalist class.

The announcement of a delay received pushback from the City Council in a committee session later that day. The council has been meeting remotely, not in person, for months. David Rubin, director of CHOP's PolicyLab, double-downed on reopening, which he said can be done "quite safely." Against mounting evidence about the truth of these claims from parents, he said they "were greatly encouraged by the evidence that even large districts like New York City had very

infrequent transmission."

New York City, however, is the worst-impacted city in America, with nearly 700,000 confirmed cases and over 25,000 deaths. According to New York's own figures, there have been over 15,000 confirmed cases in the city's schools since September 14. Since that time, the district has closed school buildings for 24 hours 588 times and for longer periods 1,543 times. This is in spite of the fact that the political establishment in that city, led by Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo, are also furiously pushing to reopen schools.

City Council members expressed their unanimous support for reopening schools as quickly as possible. Council member Helen Gym, the Children and Youth Committee Chair, said, the "[t]op priority is reopening schools promptly and safely" and the reasoning behind the public hearing is to "have a respectful engagement with people who have diverse perspectives." After Hite's remarks, Council member Maria Quinones Sanchez said, "We all are committed to a common goal."

The mayor is currently dangling the opportunity to get vaccinated as an incentive for educators to return to schools. However, children have no timetable to be inoculated, and the vaccination rollout has been moving at a snail's pace at best, with all teachers not expected to be vaccinated until April or May.



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