

Opposition mounts to unsafe opening of schools in Spain

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Opposition is mounting to the continued opening of unsafe schools in Spain. There are growing calls by educators and parents to close schools, and strikes have broken out among students as infection rates in education centres soar.

Coronavirus cases in schools have rapidly increased since children returned to classrooms after the holidays, with the number of outbreaks in education centres more than quadrupling in only two weeks. In the week ending January 22, the Ministry of Health reported 95 new outbreaks in a seven-day period; by February 5, this had risen to 413 individual outbreaks in schools in a single week, the highest figure since the government began recording this data. An “outbreak” is defined as a cluster of three or more linked cases in a single area.

The number of schoolchildren who have had to self-isolate due to coronavirus infections has also shot up. In the Madrid region, the number of children in quarantine doubled in a week, from 12,051 in the last week of January to 25,540 at the start of February. In the same period, the number of classrooms forced to close tripled, increasing from 357 to 1,025.

In Catalonia, the number of classrooms placed in quarantine doubled in two weeks, with 25 percent of schools in the regional capital of Barcelona having at least one class closed. Meanwhile, in the Basque Country, this figure has increased 12-fold since the return to school after the holidays, and multiplied by 11 in the region of Castilla y León. Across Spain, nearly 6,000 classes are quarantined.

While the number of daily coronavirus cases reported across Spain has been gradually falling since the end of January, deaths have continued to rise. An average of 480 people died of the virus every day last week, taking the official death toll to over 65,000. Last Tuesday, Spain reached the horrific milestone of 3 million cases,

only the fourth European country to have done so.

Despite the explosion of cases in schools, the Podemos-PSOE (Socialist Party) government has ruled out moving to online learning while the pandemic rages. In a press conference last week, PSOE Education Minister Isabel Celaá insisted on “maintaining in-person education, because education centres are the safest environments that they [children] could be in. ... In-person education is irreplaceable, a social conquest.”

Similarly, Fernando Simón, director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies, claimed in a press conference last week that “Schools continue to be safer than most other areas of social life,” cynically declaring that closing schools would in fact make children less safe than being at home! “We can’t remove from their day-to-day [life] the part of the day in which students are the most protected with masks and preventative measures,” he pronounced absurdly.

Simón’s claim that schools are one of the safest places for children and teachers is belied by the government’s own data. Health Ministry figures from the first week of February show that schools are the site of far more infections than care homes, where 161 outbreaks were recorded, workplaces (270 outbreaks), or other social settings (407 outbreaks). This compares to the 413 outbreaks reported in schools.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, schools must remain open whatever the cost, to act as holding pens for children while parents are sent back to unsafe workplaces to continue generating profits for the bourgeoisie.

This criminal policy is meeting increased opposition among workers and youth, however.

Last Thursday, students at over 60 different institutions in the region of Valencia went on strike,

protesting the “devastating impact” of the pandemic on public education. The student strikers demanded that stay-at-home lock-down measures be imposed and that all non-essential production and school activity be halted to protect the population from the virus.

Students also called for the cancellation of all exams, to be replaced with other forms of assessment, and for all parents to receive paid leave and have their jobs protected so that they can stay at home to care for their children. Other demands included: to reduce class sizes, to hire new teachers and health care professionals in all education centres and to install high-quality air filtration systems.

Parents from the Valencian Confederation of Parents’ Associations also called for the “immediate” closure of schools, as well as the vaccination of all education workers.

Meanwhile, in Salamanca, in the region of Castilla y León, parents’ organisation DERPA (*Derecho a Enseñanza sin Riesgo en Pandemia*—The Right to Education without Risk in the Pandemic) has demanded that the regional government allow parents the choice of whether or not to send their children into school. “[School attendance] is a very significant risk,” said Verónica González, president of DERPA, “and there are families with [underlying] conditions.”

In many regions, parents have taken matters into their own hands, refusing to send their children into schools. In Andalucía, absence rates in primary schools doubled in the first term of the year as compared to last year. In the first term of the 2019-20 school year, 6,152 cases of absenteeism were reported in this region; in 2020-21, this increased to 11,427.

In the Andalucían town of La Línea de la Concepción, which borders the British enclave of Gibraltar, over 90 percent of schoolchildren have been kept away from classrooms by their parents since the Christmas break. The town has had one of the highest incidence rates of the virus in Spain. Many parents fear an outbreak of the far more contagious British strain due to its proximity to Gibraltar.

Education unions in Andalucía have made very weak statements of support for schools to be temporarily closed. Public sector union *Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios* (CSIF) spokesperson Pilar González stated that the “prompt and temporary closure of education centres in these [worst-hit] areas,

which would be reviewed after 14 days …, would serve to contain the spread of contagion in the autonomous region [Andalucía] and to prevent schools from becoming … unsafe places for students and teachers.”

At the end of January, the Workers’ Councils (CCOO), one of Spain’s largest unions, also called for schools in some of the worst-affected regions of Spain to temporarily move to online teaching “in cases where public health officials deem it [necessary].” Where in-person education is still possible, the CCOO proposed that teachers receive FFP2 masks.

While there is no lack of willingness to fight among educators, parents and students, the unions have refused to call for strike action to force the closure of schools. Their supposed “opposition” is limited to politely worded letters asking regional governments to take action, requests which they know full well will be ignored. The unions’ calls for school closures are restricted to only a few regions or sub-regions, thereby working to prevent a coordinated struggle across Spain and internationally.

The unions seek not to organise opposition to unsafe schools, but to demobilise it. Their impotent pleas to the central and regional governments aim to give the impression that they have tried to oppose in-person schooling, and so to convince workers that nothing more can be done.

Workers must break with these bought-and-paid-for tools of big business, turning instead to their class brothers and sisters internationally. Strikes and protests have already broken out across the world, with educators and students mobilising in opposition to unsafe schools in Brazil, India, Germany, the USA and many other countries.

The way forward for workers in Spain is to join their struggle with these international movements. Rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the trade unions must be formed, to prepare the way for a European-wide general strike, to close schools and save lives.



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