

Stop the deadly reopening of Philadelphia Schools!

**Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
19 February 2021**

To join the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, contact us through the form at wsws.org/edsafety.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands a stop to the drive to reopen the Philadelphia public school system amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has now killed more than 500,000 people in the United States alone. We further call on all educators, parents and students to join our fight to prevent the return to in-person teaching under unsafe conditions.

The real aim of school re-openings is not to promote the well-being of students, but to get their parents back to work to generate profits for the corporations, banks, and billionaires, who have seen their wealth soar throughout the pandemic while working class people die.

This is a policy of social murder. Many will die, and many more will suffer long-term debilitating illness. This cannot be allowed to happen.

We reject the lie that the virus will not spread in the schools, which is being promoted by both Democrats and Republicans. Earlier this week, President Joe Biden lyingly claimed on CNN that children are safe. Responding to a second grade student, Biden said, “You’re not likely to be able to be exposed to something and spread it to mommy or daddy,” and, “Kids don’t get ... COVID very often. It’s unusual for that to happen.” He added, “You’re in the safest group of people in the whole world.”

Schools are not some magical place where the virus doesn’t spread. All educators know that schools and buses are petri dishes, this is why we require vaccines for all basic viruses. The authorities are claiming that COVID-19 is somehow the exception to the rule, but it is not.

Numerous scientific studies prove that COVID-19 will inevitably circulate in the classrooms, hallways, bathrooms and buses. It will infect children, teenagers, staff and teachers, and they in turn will carry the virus home to their loved ones in the neighborhoods and suburbs of Philadelphia and beyond.

The situation in Pennsylvania is catastrophic. Pennsylvania ranks 51st—worst out of all 50 states and Washington D.C.—in transmission rates, and it is near the bottom in vaccination rates at 43rd. Assessing the data, analyst Jill Gonzalez explained that this “means that in Pennsylvania right now, twice as many

people are likely to give COVID-19 to someone else than say Alaska or Vermont where vaccinations are really rolling.”

Organizations of doctors, the Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians, the American College of Physicians and the Pennsylvania Osteopathic Medical Association have all condemned the decision by the administration of Governor Tom Wolf to favor powerful and politically-connected HMOs over smaller clinics serving neighborhoods and communities across the state. They call Wolf’s policy “misguided” and a “woeful mistake.”

The hypocrisy is staggering. At the same time that health advisories say that indoor groups should not exceed 10 persons, they are shoving students into overcrowded school buses and classrooms. The new variants of COVID-19, which are even more contagious, will lead to renewed spikes, illness and death.

A nationwide conspiracy is underway to reopen schools, involving not only the Democrats but the also the teachers unions. In Philadelphia, it involves the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and its president, Jerry Jordan, School District of Philadelphia Superintendent William Hite, the corporate media, the city administration of Jim Kenney and Governor Tom Wolf.

Behind the scenes, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten has undoubtedly played a critical role, having recently told the *New York Times* that she “spends 15 hours per day on the phone ... with local labor leaders, mayors, the White House, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention” working to reopen schools everywhere.

Those who claim that their overriding concern in reopening schools is the welfare of inner-city children are the same forces that have starved public education of funding for decades, while attacking the principle of public education itself through the promotion of privately-run charter schools. The result in Philadelphia, as across the US, has been overcrowded classrooms, slashed curriculum, and crumbling, poorly-ventilated, asbestos-ridden buildings. One Philadelphia teacher is now terminally ill from asbestos poisoning.

School buildings were unsafe even before the pandemic. It is entirely possible, moreover, that the school district may declare that some schools are too expensive to renovate to prepare for reopenings as justification to close schools in poor, working class and minority communities which have long been targeted

for closure.

In recent days Philadelphia teachers have begun receiving notices about how to get vaccinated through a district-sponsored program. But this is only a ploy to get students back into the classrooms, allowing the virus to spread among students and be brought home to their families and communities.

Moreover, Philadelphia teachers know that schools are under-reporting the number of cases among students and educators. In the few cases where dashboards are put up, these don't have accurate information and are not kept up. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is working to expose all cases and other information being kept from educators, students and the community. We invite educators with information to submit information to the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee Facebook page .

The conspirators intend to copy the model used to bully Chicago teachers back into the classroom. The script involves public declarations of concern and opposition from the union, while it colludes behind teachers' backs to negotiate a reopening. These "negotiations" will result in a "deal" in which all parties join hands to declare that "the schools are safe." Carefully-selected experts who have never set foot in one of Philadelphia's schools—and would never send their children to one—will then tell teachers that the purchase of a few shoddy fans will make everything fine in the best of all possible worlds.

The only difference is that, unlike in Chicago, Philadelphia teachers will not even be allowed to vote on the phony deal worked out by the union behind closed doors!

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the Memorandum of Agreement signed by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to allow a mediator to determine whether schools are safe or not. This will be used to justify reopening in-person teaching in some schools, applying cosmetic changes, such as new fans, or filters added to others.

There is massive opposition to the reopening of the schools. Thousands of Philadelphia teachers have protested. The fact that the great majority of Philadelphia families, presented with the alternative, have chosen remote learning—in spite of the hardships it imposes—demonstrates the great opposition in the working class to the reopenings. But this opposition must be organized independently of the PFT and prepare to lead a determined struggle against the union's efforts to enforce the reopening of schools.

What is taking place in Philadelphia is not a "local issue." This is a pandemic. It requires a global response. It makes no difference whether the school is in Philadelphia, Brazil, or Germany. Everywhere, the cutting edge of the offensive against the working class is driving teachers back into the classroom.

Working class opposition has erupted against the social murder policy of the ruling class in São Paulo, Nigeria, France,

Cote d'Ivoire, and over a dozen other countries worldwide. No less explosive has been the opposition to Biden's reopening policy from educators in the US, with educators protesting in cities and states such as Chicago, New Jersey, Arizona, and, soon, in Los Angeles, the country's second-largest district. The pressing issue is linking the struggle of educators across the country with autoworkers, logistics workers, health care workers and every other section of the working class in a nationwide general strike.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee proposes the following demands to Philadelphia teachers as the basis for organizing their struggle. These are based not on what the corporations and the politicians claim is affordable, but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, educators and the entire working class.

- End the undemocratic "mediation" framework! Teachers must have the right to vote on any plan to reopen schools!

- All decisions about school openings and closures must be overseen solely by rank-and-file teachers and parents in consultation with scientific experts of their choosing, not the school district and union. A scientific approach to the pandemic is impossible as long as the profit motive holds sway!

- For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools to stop the spread of COVID-19!

- Full funding for public education, internet access and online instruction!

- Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children!

- No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home!

- For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers!

- Halt all nonessential production!

Our committee is part of an international network of rank-and-file committees that is fighting against the homicidal drive to reopen schools and workplaces. If you agree with these demands, join this movement today by filling out the form at wsws.org/edsafety .



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