

Teachers in US resist demand to accept “reasonable risk” of dying

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As the death toll from COVID-19 reaches a horrific half a million in the United States, the Biden administration and the corporate media are ratcheting up their campaign demanding that educators and students resume in-person schooling despite scientific warnings of a major new surge of the pandemic as the winter turns to spring.

The same educators who were hailed as “heroes” in the early months of the pandemic last year are now being denounced as selfish and irrational because they refuse to imperil themselves, their students and the communities they serve. Although a recent poll by the National Parents Union showed that 42 percent of parents want their children to attend classes remotely for the rest of the school year—and only 27 percent want fully in-person instruction—the media has falsely claimed there is a groundswell of popular support to fully reopen the schools.

The Biden administration is spearheading this campaign, with the Democratic president reiterating his demand that schools be opened “five days a week” by April 1 during a CNN town hall meeting last week. When asked by a second grade student if she could catch COVID-19 and possibly infect her parents, Biden flatly lied, stating, “You’re not likely to be able to be exposed to something and spread it to mommy or daddy.”

Democratic governors and local officials have carried out this campaign at the state and city levels. Schools are being opened this week in Detroit, even though Michigan has the third highest known cases of the more infectious B.1.1.7 UK variant among all US states. In Chicago, the next stage in the phased reopening of the nation’s third largest district starts Monday, with the return of tens of thousands of K-5 educators following the return of Pre-K and special education teachers last week. Some 62,000 middle school students in New York City will return February 25, following the return of Pre-K through fifth grade students in December.

In Philadelphia, the opposition of teachers has forced the city government to delay openings for a third time, now until March 1. Teachers in Fairfax, Virginia and Montclair, New Jersey are also resisting back-to-school efforts.

The opposition among educators has found its most advanced expression in the growing network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which includes teachers and support staff workers in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas, Alabama, New

York City, Los Angeles, Chicago and other locations. These committees are fighting to mobilize educators and other workers to prepare a general strike to close schools and non-essential production until the population is inoculated and the pandemic contained.

In California, Governor Gavin Newsom has denounced teachers for resisting his efforts to open schools, including in Los Angeles, which remains in the state’s highest “purple tier,” which indicates that the rate of infections is “widespread,” with more than seven cases per 100,000 residents.

On Saturday, Los Angeles teachers, parents and students took part in a car caravan protest against the rush to reopen schools. Los Angeles County already has the highest death toll of any county in the country, and the tragedy would be magnified if students, many from low-income and immigrant families living in multi-generational homes, returned to classrooms.

The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union, which organized the protest, has said it will call a strike vote on whether its 30,000 members will refuse to return if the district opens “too soon.” The UTLA is following the same pattern as the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which last month called a strike authorization vote under mounting pressure from teachers, only to negotiate a miserable back-to-school deal with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

The UTLA and California Teachers Association (CTA) are seeking to reach a similar deadly deal with Newsom. The unions hailed as a “step forward” the governor’s decision Friday to set aside 10 percent of all the first-round vaccine doses the state receives for teachers, educators and childcare workers.

At every level, the unions fully support the campaign to reopen schools. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who also sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC), made the rounds of the news shows over the weekend.

During an MSNBC interview Friday, Weingarten falsely claimed that the school reopening guidelines issued February 12 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “were scientifically based” and agreed that teachers did not have to be vaccinated before returning to schools. While acknowledging that “all the risk is on the adults doing the

education,” Weingarten declared, “we know that the benefits are huge for kids, that’s why we are trying to take this risk.”

It is certain that Weingarten will not be taking the same risk as her members, some 530 of whom have already died from the virus. After ramming through the deal to open Chicago schools earlier this month, Weingarten, a multimillionaire with a \$500,000-plus annual salary, boasted to the *New York Times* that she spends 15 hours a day on the phone from the safety of her Manhattan home speaking to the White House, the CDC, local mayors and union leaders to get schools open.

During an interview on NBC’s *Meet the Press* Sunday morning, Weingarten was asked what “reasonable risk” she would have her members take. She responded by thanking host Chuck Todd for the “opportunity to debunk the myth” that “our union doesn’t want to reopen schools,” adding that the CDC guidelines outlined the “risks.” Weingarten pointed to the deal between the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and New York City Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio as a model for supposedly “safely opening schools.”

In fact, schools in the city were open for less than two months before the district was forced to close in November due to rising infections. In total, there have been 15,628 infections in the nation’s largest district between September 14 and February 21, including 7,253 students and 8,375 staff, according to the Department of Education.

While acknowledging that the AFT was not insisting that teachers be vaccinated before schools reopen, Todd said many local unions were, and that in Fairfax, Virginia teachers even wanted children to be vaccinated first. They are “moving the goalposts,” Todd bitterly complained.

Weingarten responded by insinuating that resistant teachers were driven by unfounded, irrational fears and that the AFT would straighten them out. “What you’re hearing when you hear that is that people are scared, and what we need to do is meet fear with facts, which is what we are trying to do. So, we have had Dr. Fauci on two town halls, we had a vaccine town hall with experts, so just like we are meeting vaccine hesitancy with facts, the evidence and the data, we need to do the same in terms of educators.”

According to Weingarten, the concerns of teachers who have seen half a million people die are no more rational than those of anti-vaxxers!

The drive to reopen schools is not motivated by science—which has provided indisputable evidence from around the world that schools are a major vector for the transmission of the deadly disease. Nor is it driven by concern for children. The same Democratic and Republican politicians, including Biden, who are feigning concern over the fate of students have spent the last four decades gutting funding for public schools and diverting public resources into for-profit charter schools and other school privatization schemes.

On the contrary, the reopening of schools—which is supported by both big business parties and backed by every section of the

media from the *Wall Street Journal* and Bezos-owned *Washington Post* to the *New York Times* and the liberal-left *Nation* magazine—is solely driven by the economic and political imperatives of the corporate and financial elite. Children must be back in schools, they insist, so their parents can return to unsafe workplaces to produce the profits needed to prop up the speculative bubble on Wall Street and the unsustainable levels of corporate debt.

Teachers increasingly see through the lies of the pro-capitalist forces arrayed against them. A San Francisco teacher told the WSWS, “The CDC and politicians continue to use the word ‘safely return’ to school. This is impossible during a pandemic. ‘Safely’ implies mitigation efforts that are successfully preventing transmission. In reality, they are, at best, only reducing transmissions. Even the two reports cited by the CDC to support their back-to-school plan showed some transmission still occurring, in spite of mitigation efforts.

“What the CDC, politicians and pundits are ACTUALLY calling for is not a ‘safe’ return to school, but one that they know will result in some degree of transmission, serious illness and death. Therefore, they are not telling teachers, families and the public that it is truly safe to return. They are telling us that if we follow their plan, there will be an ACCEPTABLE number of hospitalizations and deaths that are DELIBERATELY part of the plan.

“Of course, they won’t say this publicly because it is so horrific and damning, and it shows their utter disregard for human life. But we can, both in the WSWS, and to our peers and colleagues. And it’s important to do so because I don’t think the public would support any number of deliberate deaths.”

Teachers are fighting for science and life and in opposition to the gang-up of the big business politicians, the corporate media and the unions, which want to sacrifice human life for profit. In order to fight, educators need new organizations of struggle, which are independent of the corporatist unions and both the Democrats and Republicans. We urge educators to join and build rank-and-file safety committees in every district and unite with educators and the entire working class across state lines in preparation for a nationwide political general strike.



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