

Los Angeles Unified School District moves to reopen schools for in-person instruction

Peter Ross
23 February 2021

The Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting on Thursday, February 25, at 6:30 p.m. PST to discuss the developments in Los Angeles and to mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your co-workers to build the committee! All teachers, support staff and supporters should join the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Austin Beutner announced on Monday that some in-person teaching will resume next week, with a broader reopening planned for April 9. The school district is the second largest in the nation, with 665,000 students and roughly 60,000 staff, including 26,500 teachers.

Among the in-person services which will resume next week are child care, special education, and some athletic and tutoring activities, based on the terms of an agreement reached last October between the school district and the teachers union, the United Teachers Los Angeles.

Most California districts, including Los Angeles, remain in the “purple tier,” with more than seven cases per 100,000 residents and a nearly five percent positive test rate statewide. The total number of deaths due to COVID-19 is approaching 50,000, after months in which ICUs across the state were filled to capacity.

The announcement by Beutner is among the latest steps in a campaign by the ruling class to reopen schools nationwide. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement on Sunday that US schools must “actually try to get as much in-person as possible right now.” In California, the *Los Angeles Times* is leading the way in cheerleading these efforts, publishing an article on Monday titled, “L.A. parents demand schools reopen, saying science and improved conditions are on their side.”

In fact, both parents and teachers are overwhelmingly opposed to reopening schools at the height of the pandemic. Ric, a fifth grade teacher in LAUSD, told the WWS, “The notion that students rarely become sick is a bald-faced lie. There can be no doubt that it’s safer to vaccinate both

teachers and students before opening schools. This is of no concern to millionaire Weingarten, who has a cushy job outside of harm’s way. If she had to go back into a classroom, I’m sure she’d be singing a different tune.”

As for the claim that “science is on the side” of reopening schools, scientific studies have confirmed that districts in which schools are open for in-person instruction have far higher levels of community transmission, and that young children are capable of spreading the disease. In reality, school reopenings are motivated not by concern for children’s welfare but by brutal economic considerations, forcing parents back to work to rack up profits for the financial elite.

The push to reopen LAUSD is part of a nationwide campaign, spearheaded by the Biden administration, to force school districts to open against the opposition of teachers and parents. In Detroit, public schools are scheduled to reopen for in-person instruction today, and in Philadelphia kindergarten through second grade classes are scheduled to return next Monday.

Elsewhere in California, San Diego Unified School District announced a target date of April 5 to reopen schools. In San Bernardino near Los Angeles, tens of thousands of pupils are already back in classrooms.

The United Teachers Los Angeles union has responded to the reopening push with militant posturing, declaring it would hold a strike authorization vote in the near future. In a statement last week, UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz stated, “Educators cannot support a broad physical reopening of schools until school staff required to work in person have access to vaccinations, LA County is out of the purple tier and reaches much lower community transmission rate, and all schools have strict multi-layered mitigation strategies in place—such as COVID testing, physical distancing, use of masks, hand hygiene, and isolation/quarantine procedures.”

However, teachers must be warned that the UTLA is only maneuvering in order to force through an eventual sellout agreement. It is following in the footsteps of the Chicago

Teachers Union, which also held a strike authorization vote only to ram through a deal at the last second.

The leadership of UTLA, like the CTU's ruling Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) faction, enjoys the support of various pseudo-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America, who claim that the union's leadership is part of a "long-awaited revival of organized labor," in the words of *Jacobin* writer Eric Blanc. In fact, UTLA is no different from the pro-corporate unions at schools and workplaces around the country. It sold out a militant strike of Los Angeles teachers in 2019, just as the CTU sold out teacher strikes in 2012 and 2019.

Even if Myart-Cruz's demands are met, they are still grossly inadequate. Should reopening be delayed until Los Angeles is dropped from the "purple tier"—the worst level of the pandemic as designated by the state—to the second worst "red tier," students and teachers will still face unacceptably dangerous levels of infection. This would still translate to between four and 700 new cases per day in Los Angeles County, a threshold which in any case may actually be met before April 9.

John, a middle school teacher in LAUSD, told the WSWS, "We have spent 11-plus months working with students to get online schooling to work effectively as it is now. More of my students are doing more now than at any prior time in the last 11 months. Our return will be predicated on the use of a new schooling/learning model (hybrid with greatly reduced class size) that none of us has used or worked with before and nor have our students."

John added, "Teachers' comments against and resistance toward returning to onsite schooling is a direct reflection of their concern for the safety of everyone involved—in effect, concern for the public safety of their communities."

The demand that teachers and staff—who are not essential workers—have access to vaccinations is already being used in an attempt to pit teachers against other sections of workers by forcing them to compete for the inadequate levels of vaccines available. In Michigan, Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed an order which allows teachers to "skip the line" by classifying them as eligible for vaccinations in Phase 1B, along with health care and frontline workers and people over the age of 65. California's millionaire Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the state would be setting aside 10 percent of all weekly vaccine allotments for teachers.

Moreover, at current rates, the rollout of vaccines will not be adequate to vaccinate all teachers before the April 9 deadline.

Even as LAUSD rushes to reopen, a more contagious variant of COVID-19 which emerged in California last July has emerged as the dominant strain in the state. The new

variant, which has so far been found in at least 45 other states and six other countries, accounted for 44 percent of infections found in Southern California in January, according to a February 11 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The variant, which appears to reduce the effect of antibodies in neutralizing the virus, has likely contributed to the rapid spread of the disease.

In another recent study, researchers at the University of California San Francisco have predicted that the new variant will likely account for around 90 percent of the state's infections by the end of March. Researchers also found that, in a sample of 324 hospitalized COVID-19 patients, those who had contracted the new variant were more likely to be admitted to the ICU and more likely to die.

Dr. Charles Chiu, an infectious disease expert who led the UCSF study, told the *Los Angeles Times*, in comparing the California variant to other deadly strains found in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil, that "the devil is already here."

Reopening schools even as this new variant of COVID-19 spreads is nothing less than a policy of social murder. Under these conditions, there is every possibility that yet another wave of mass infection and death will be the result, as schools are quickly transformed into breeding grounds for the new variants.

Stopping this catastrophe requires a real lockdown, shutting down all non-essential workplaces and keeping schools closed to in-person learning, until the virus is under control.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact