

Philadelphia teachers union endorses bogus claims of school renovations as cover for reopening schools

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7:30p.m. EST Thursday night, February 25, to discuss the developments in Philadelphia and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee! All teachers, support staff and supporters should join the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

As the March 1 start date nears for the first phase of reopening for the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), the eighteenth largest in the country, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) is continuing to provide political cover for the school district's reopening plans, worked out with the union behind closed doors.

The PFT, while posing as "concerned" about certain elements of the reopening plans, claims falsely that schools can be made safe through updates to decrepit school buildings, in particular, improved ventilation systems. In comments before the Pennsylvania House of Representatives' Education Committee, PFT Legislative Representative Hillary Linardopoulos said, "Let's be clear: our goal at [the PFT] has been, and will continue to be, to reopen buildings, because we know that inside of a classroom is where the true magic of education takes place."

The PFT is endorsing politically-motivated pseudo-science to justify the reopening of schools, which will inevitably lead to new outbreaks and deaths. In fact, studies have consistently shown that school closures are among the most effective mitigation strategies for combating the virus.

The real purpose of school reopenings is not concern for the emotional and educational well-being of children, but to get their parents back to work so that they can continue producing profits for the major corporations.

In the face of overwhelming opposition from teachers, the PFT was compelled to call for teachers not to return to in-person instruction on February 8, the original set by the district for reopening. However, this was only a maneuver

aimed at buying time to work out a deal with the district to get teachers back into buildings.

The role the PFT is playing follows the nationwide pattern for school reopenings, which was established with the betrayal of the Chicago Teachers Union. The Democratic Party is using the sham of "negotiations" with teachers unions that have signed off on school closures and layoffs for decades in order to beat back the opposition of wide majorities of teachers and parents, particularly working class parents, to a return to in-person learning.

In the city of Philadelphia, the framework for these "negotiations" is governed by a Memorandum of Agreement signed last fall between the PFT and the school district. All disputes over particular elements of the reopening plan are to be settled by an "independent" mediator, Chicago-based Dr. Peter Orris, behind the backs of teachers, who are not even given the right to vote on his decisions. The mediator is due to render a decision in the next several days on which school buildings can be "safely" reopened, and which require additional work.

In opposition to this, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, an independent organization of teachers formed with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party, released a statement last week that demanded instead that all decisions on school openings and closures be made by rank-and-file teachers and parents, in consultation with experts of their choosing. "A scientific approach to the pandemic is impossible as long as the profit motive holds sway!" the committee statement reads.

Last Friday, the PFT sponsored state Democratic politicians on the union's social media accounts, who falsely claimed that significant resources were now being spent to upgrade buildings after decades of neglect, particularly since the Great Recession when \$1 billion was cut from school budgets statewide. Philadelphia closed 31 schools permanently.

Seeking to give the reopening plan a scientific shoeshine, state Senator Vincent Hughes (D-Philadelphia/Montgomery) and state Representative Elizabeth Fiedler (D-Philadelphia) expressed their “determination” to pass school reform and fix the nightmarish conditions in Philadelphia.

However, the two proposals which they cited, the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) and the Public School Building Emergency Repair and Renovation Grant program, have not even been passed and will take years to fully tackle the innumerable problems afflicting Pennsylvania schools.

“The politicians don’t care about education, they’ve been cutting education for years,” one Philadelphia teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The classrooms are overcrowded and don’t have supplies. The PFT is a joke. They are pushing to get us back in the classroom. They are too tied up with the Democratic party. They don’t fight for the teachers.

“What they are pretending is that you can reopen schools safely. Just not true. COVID is transmitted [through the air]. The ventilation systems in our schools will not stop this. We have some buildings that are a hundred years old. Some windows do not open all the way. Philly teachers have gotten cancer from exposure to asbestos. Buildings that are open are not following the existing rules. Staff ran out of PPE and there is little mask wearing occurring.”

Philadelphia school buildings have a long, sordid history of gross underfunding. A majority of them were constructed before World War II, and the district’s buildings contain more than 11 million square feet of the carcinogenic substance asbestos. One veteran Philadelphia teacher, Lea DiRusso, is dying of mesothelioma due to asbestos exposure. Schools are also riddled with lead and mold, broken boilers in the winter, no air conditioning during the summer, and tainted drinking water.

In spite of this, 9,000 children from pre-K to second grade are expected to enter these same death traps on March 1.

A recent photograph, widely shared on social media, exposes the bargain-bin methods through which the school district is “upgrading” buildings’ ventilation systems: cheap electric fans in windows, fastened with tape containing lead.

However, the danger of infections in school buildings is not only a function of a lack of resources. The experience in private schools and wealthier suburban districts demonstrates that a truly safe reopening is simply not possible. According to a report last month by the city’s department of health, 6 to 7 percent of private and parochial schools that reopened in the fall experienced outbreaks, defined in arbitrarily restrictive terms as six or more cases occurring within 14 days in a school which cannot be traced to a close contact outside of the school setting. The

Philadelphia School, Saints John Neumann and Maria Goretti High School all had to be shut down from outbreaks.

A teacher from the nearby Lower Merion School District in Philly’s suburbs explained that, even though her school district is “very wealthy” and possesses more resources and proper HVAC systems than the city’s school district, it has still experienced many outbreaks, which have been covered up by the union and district.

She continued, “I spent all last summer fighting both my Human Resources office and my union [the Lower Merion Education Association] for the right to work from home. I have an auto-immune disorder, but they made it very difficult for me.” She stated bluntly that her union had “no plans to fight reopening” and that it is in the pocket of the Democratic Party. “I haven’t heard from my union since December 3,” she explained, noting that her district has since moved to hybrid teaching from remote without hearing any updates from her union.

According to Dr. Benjamin Mateus, a science writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The repair or replacement of ventilation systems is critical, but it is only one part of a constellation of measures that must be met before schools are reopened. This includes reducing regional cases of COVID-19 to exceptionally low levels, a vast acceleration of the production and distribution of vaccines to inoculate the population, the establishment of a rigorous, well equipped and trained contact tracing infrastructure that can do rapid testing of individuals and their contacts and, if necessary, close schools and communities to bring the pandemic under control. Until then, schools should remain closed and students taught remotely.”



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