Form rank-and-file committees to oppose school reopening drive!

Los Angeles educators must learn the lessons of the sellout by the Chicago Teachers Union!

Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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The Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes the drive to reopen Los Angeles schools by early April. Given the continued spread of COVID-19 and the rapid growth of more dangerous strains of the virus, there are no conditions under which school buildings can be made safe. Rather, schools must remain closed in order to bring the pandemic under control.

We call on all educators, parents, students and workers to join our fight to prevent the return to in-person teaching under such life-threatening conditions.

Dr. Charles Chiu, senior author of a study documenting the rise of the new California variant known as CAL.20C, recently told the press that "This variant is concerning because our data shows that it is more contagious, more likely to be associated with severe illness, and at least partially resistant to neutralizing antibodies. The devil is already here."

In spite of warnings from the scientific community, both Republicans and Democrats across the country—including the Biden administration, California Governor Gavin Newsom and LA Mayor Eric Garcetti—are campaigning relentlessly to open up the schools in order to reopen the economy. Their top priority is not to save lives but to put parents back to work pumping out profits to sustain the trillions made by Wall Street over the course of the pandemic.

The efforts to reopen schools have been coupled with a deluge of pseudoscience led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to promote the false claim that schools are safe to reopen.

This is an international phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is demanding schools reopen by mid-March. In Brazil, tens of thousands of teachers in São Paulo have gone on strike against the drive to reopen schools in the largest district in the Americas.

Polls have repeatedly shown there is overwhelming opposition to school reopenings among students and parents, especially within the working class. The central task which educators confront is to unite and mobilize this support across the US and internationally in opposition to the drive by the world's governments to sacrifice workers' lives for profit.

The Democratic Party, which is now spearheading the drive to reopen schools, is relying upon the pro-capitalist teacher unions to disorient and demobilize the opposition of teachers and parents.

The mold was cast last month in Chicago, when the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) forced through a sellout deal with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) against overwhelming rank-and-file support for a strike.

The bureaucrats which control the UTLA and the CTU are cut from the same cloth. Their leading figures are drawn from pseudo-left groups, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which specialize in presenting the same pro-capitalist Democratic Party politics with a "progressive" sheen.

The UTLA under Cecily Myart-Cruz and the CTU under Jesse Sharkey present themselves as "radical" alternatives to previous union officials, but they have forced through sellouts no less ruthlessly. Their role in the campaign to reopen schools was presaged by their respective sellouts of militant strikes in Chicago in 2012 and 2019 and in Los Angeles in 2019.

To organize and orient their own struggle, teachers in Los Angeles must learn the lessons of Chicago! In a membership meeting last week, UTLA Treasurer Alex Orozco admitted as much when he said, "If the district mandates us to go back, we will stand together, kind of like in Chicago."

Orozco would have teachers believe that the CTU fought against school reopenings. In reality, the union followed a three-point plan to force teachers back to work, a plan which UTLA is also following:

Point #1: Call a strike authorization vote as a cover for the union's support for reopening and for its ongoing negotiations behind closed doors with the school district.

In January, a strike authorization vote called by the CTU passed overwhelmingly, expressing the opposition of teachers to any return to work under pandemic conditions. In flagrant violation of this mandate from teachers, for whom there was nothing to negotiate with the school district, the CTU continued negotiating for weeks with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot. In reality, as the eventual agreement demonstrated, what was involved were not "negotiations" but a conspiracy between the city and union against the teachers.

Moreover, the CTU publicly supported reopening. It demanded only that it follow "a health metric based on CDC guidance, a phased reopening, access to vaccinations for educators, and enforceable safety standards in school buildings." Within hours of a deadline set by the city which almost certainly would have

triggered a strike, the CTU blindsided teachers by announcing a deal which it then pushed through within 48 hours. As soon as the deal was set in Chicago, the CDC issued its updated, politically-motivated guidelines which allow for reopening schools "at any level of community transmission."

The UTLA is also expected to call a strike authorization vote this week. There is no reason to doubt that it will pass by a wide margin. But the UTLA itself has made clear that it supports reopenings, insisting only on meaningless provisions, such as Los Angeles County dropping into the second worst "red tier" of infections—which would still translate into several hundred infections per day in the city—and that teachers have "access" to vaccinations.

Point #2: Break the unity of education workers by dividing them across jurisdictional lines and isolate them from the broader working class.

The reopening of schools in Chicago is now being phased in by grades, dividing elementary school teachers from their counterparts in middle schools and high schools. This, in fact, was originally proposed by the CTU itself. Moreover, the union negotiated with the district separately from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, which announced a deal to send thousands of janitors, bus drivers and other support staff back to schools a week before the CTU announced its own deal.

After the union announced a deal, Sharkey declared that teachers should not strike because their co-workers could scab remotely, an indication that the CTU would do nothing to enforce the picket line.

In Los Angeles, the UTLA is already trying to break the unity of teachers by raising the prospect of a "voluntary" return to work. In comments last week, UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz said, "With the number of COVID cases dipping slightly, along with the safety language bargained in the side letters, some members might be more comfortable volunteering to deliver services and/or assessments in person."

Meanwhile, SEIU Local 99 has already signed a deal with LAUSD to return non-teaching staff to work in advance of the reopening. The union itself stated that the agreement with non-teachers "begins a process for returning thousands of employees to campuses to prepare schools for the eventual reopening to students."

Point #3: Palm off responsibility for reopening from the union onto teachers themselves.

Once the framework of their rotten deal was in place, the CTU moved rapidly to organize a sham vote, falsely claiming that the ultimate decision rested not with the union but with teachers themselves. In reality, the union had violated the mandate which teachers had given it through the strike vote and forced teachers to vote virtually at gunpoint, while Lightfoot was threatening lockouts.

By stalling for weeks, the CTU softened up the teachers, making it clear nothing would be done to defend them. Meanwhile, to cover their own tracks, the union's House of Delegates passed a meaningless vote of "no confidence" in Lightfoot even after they pushed the mayor's demands through the membership.

The UTLA is scheduling a series of membership meetings over the next several days, which Myart-Cruz claims is for the membership to make "collective decisions" about reopening. But the UTLA is not at all interested in the "collective decision-making" of teachers but in browbeating them into what has already been worked out with LAUSD.

Educators must oppose the plan which the UTLA is following with a plan of their own. The Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee fights to organize teachers around the following program:

First, the struggle must be expanded to include the entire working class of Southern California, who are the educators' natural allies in the fight against "herd immunity." These include thousands of dock and shipyard workers refusing to go into work as unloaded cargo builds up along the busiest port in the Western Hemisphere, as well as tens of thousands of health care workers who must unite with educators to prevent a repeat of the horrors Los Angeles hospitals faced in recent months.

Second, all schools throughout Los Angeles and the country must be shut down and moved back to online classes. Studies have consistently shown that this is one of the most effective ways to limit the spread of the pandemic.

Third, organize the working class through a network of rank-and-file safety committees at school districts and workplaces throughout the country in order to prepare for a political general strike to shut down all nonessential production, with full wages guaranteed to workers, to end the pandemic once and for all.

As long as the profit motive continues to override all considerations of public health and safety, the pandemic can never be brought under control. The capitalist response to the pandemic stands for profit and death—the working class response stands for science and life.

We urge all those who agree with this statement to contact the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and prepare to fight back against these murderous policies. Information on joining our committee can be found here.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact