

Major US school districts reopen despite spread of more contagious and lethal COVID-19 variants

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Across the US, numerous school districts began reopening Monday in a reckless move that will exacerbate the spread of COVID-19. Over the past month and, in particular, following the February 10 betrayal by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the corporate media, both big business parties and the teachers unions have conspired to send millions of children into classrooms at the most dangerous stage of the pandemic. The Democratic Party has spearheaded this campaign, with local and state officials implementing Biden's goal of fully reopening the majority of K-8 schools by the end of April.

At the same time, politicians from both parties are loosening other restrictions on in-person gatherings, reopening bars, restaurants and other indoor venues. With more infectious, lethal and potentially vaccine-resistant variants of SARS-CoV-2 spreading throughout the country, the stage has been set for a massive spring surge of the pandemic that will cause further needless suffering and deaths.

The recent decline in the daily case count in the US has now stalled at roughly 70,000 new cases per day, a highly elevated figure that exceeds last summer's surge. There continue to be roughly 2,000 new deaths each day across the country, while epidemiologist Dr. Michael Osterholm has warned that there will be a "hurricane" of infections and deaths by the end of March.

In pressing to reopen schools, politicians have invoked the unscientific guidelines released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on February 12, which explicitly state that schools can open and stay open "at any level of community transmission." On Monday, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky hypocritically stated, "Now is not the time to relax the critical safeguards that we know can stop the spread of COVID-19 in our communities." Only two weeks ago, Walensky made the rounds on all the talk shows to endorse school reopenings.

It is an urgent necessity that all schools and non-essential workplaces be closed immediately until the pandemic is brought under control and the population is fully vaccinated, with full funding provided for remote learning and guaranteed income for all affected workers. Yet the exact opposite policies

are being pursued everywhere on behalf of Wall Street. The only purpose of opening schools is for them to serve as daycare facilities for children while their parents return to unsafe workplaces to produce corporate profits.

According to "Burbio's K-12 School Opening Tracker," the majority of school districts are now offering fully in-person learning or hybrid instruction in which children attend in-person part of the week. Only three states—California, Oregon and Maryland—are offering in-person learning at less than 20 percent of their schools.

School districts across Maryland began reopening Monday under orders from Republican Governor Larry Hogan, who has threatened action against teachers who do not comply. These included Anne Arundel County (80,000 total enrollment), Howard County (60,000), Baltimore City (84,000), Baltimore County (111,000) and Harford County (39,000).

The third largest district in the US, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), opened its doors Monday to roughly 37,000 K-5 students returning to their classrooms after their teachers returned last Monday. Educators for grades 6-8 also returned to their classrooms Monday, with tens of thousands of students in those grades set to return on March 8.

On Monday, School District of Philadelphia (SDP) Superintendent William Hite announced that he reached an agreement with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) to begin returning Pre-K through second grade students to schools starting on March 8, with their teachers returning this Wednesday. While reopenings for older grades have not yet been announced, this initial reopening will be used as a wedge to facilitate the broader reopening of the district, which is the eighteenth largest in the country with roughly 120,000 students.

In Tennessee, Shelby County Schools (SCS), which serves roughly 111,000 students in the Memphis metro region, began reopening Monday. On Wednesday, high schools in Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) will resume in-person learning after lower grades returned in mid-February.

Last Thursday, roughly 62,000 middle school students returned to 471 schools in New York City, the largest district in the US with over 1.1 million students. This followed the initial

reopening of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) last Wednesday, with numerous districts across Michigan reopening over the past week.

Across the West Coast, Democratic governors and mayors are pressing to reopen schools in the coming weeks. The most significant struggle is unfolding in Los Angeles, the country's second largest school district with roughly 665,000 students. The pseudo-left-led United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is following the same playbook used by the CTU in Chicago, posturing as intransigent on vaccinating teachers before reopening schools, while at the same time allowing teachers to "volunteer" to return to schools starting this Thursday.

At a press briefing Monday, California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that seven new counties in the state will move from the highest "purple tier" to the "red tier" of slightly lower infections, which will enable school districts in those counties to begin reopening. It is expected that San Francisco, with Democratic Mayor London Breed pushing to reopen schools, will be included in the list. In nearby Oakland, Democratic Mayor Libby Schaaf was a featured speaker at a right-wing rally to reopen schools, stating, "It's time we get our kids back to school."

In Washington, Tacoma Public Schools—where teachers held a sickout last week—began reopening Monday. The state's largest school district, Seattle Public Schools (SPS), is slated to send Pre-K and special education students back to school next Monday. Schools across Oregon are scheduled to resume in-person learning in late March, with the largest district in Portland reopening on April 8.

Despite the back-to-school push, many parents are boycotting in-person learning to protect the health of their children and families. Officials in Council Rock School District, just outside of Philadelphia, have complained that as many as 30 percent of the high school students who were signed up for in-person learning have not showed up.

The reopening of each of these major districts will set a precedent for the full resumption of in-person learning throughout their surrounding regions. In every instance, the most critical role is being played by the teachers unions, which have conspired with Democratic officials at the local, state and national levels to reopen schools.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, whose annual salary is roughly \$500,000 and sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC), recently told the *New York Times* that she spends 15 hours a day on the phone with the White House, the CDC, local mayors and union leaders working to get schools open.

On Monday, Weingarten issued a peculiar tweet of the WSWS article, "Thousands of students return for in-person schooling in Chicago." Addressing the tweet to CTU President Jesse Sharkey, she included a quote from Sharkey referring to his desire for speedy negotiations to reopen high schools. Evidently, Weingarten was attempting to pressure Sharkey to

follow through with this pledge.

Weingarten is widely recognized as a reactionary stooge of the Democrats, with many of her posts denounced by rank-and-file educators. A tweet replying to Weingarten by WSWS writer Kristina Betinis on the need to oppose school reopenings received an enthusiastic response.

The mass reopening of schools underway across the country will only add fuel to the fire and accelerate the spread of COVID-19 in the coming weeks. Mobilizing educators and the broader working class to oppose this policy and implement the necessary measures to contain the pandemic is a life-and-death question, which must be fought for with the utmost urgency.

Nearly one year ago, the initial lockdowns at the start of the pandemic were only implemented due to the eruption of wildcat strikes by autoworkers outside the control of the corrupt United Auto Workers (UAW), as well as the threat of wildcat strikes by educators outside the control of the AFT and other teachers unions. The closure of schools alone was estimated to have saved roughly 40,600 lives between March 9 and May 7, 2020, according to a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Over the past year, mass disaffection with the unions has spurred the growth of networks of rank-and-file safety committees among educators and autoworkers in the US, as well as Baltimore Amazon workers and other sections of the working class in the UK, Germany, Australia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and other countries. These committees are the center of opposition to the ruling elite's homicidal policies and are fighting for the preparation of general strike action in each country.

The fight to contain the pandemic is above all a political struggle against the capitalist system, which will only be resolved through an international socialist revolution. The critical task facing the working class is to develop a revolutionary leadership steeped in the history of the class struggle and the socialist movement, which only the Socialist Equality Party fights to develop internationally. All educators and other workers determined to put an end to the capitalist system that has produced the catastrophe of the pandemic should join the SEP today.



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