

United Teachers of Los Angeles colludes with state Democrats in school reopening drive

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At 2pm PST this Saturday, March 6, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees will be hosting a special event, "Unite workers to keep West Coast schools remote!" We will outline a fighting strategy to unite educators and all workers across the West Coast, as part of a national and global network of rank-and-file committees, to close schools and nonessential workplaces in order to contain the pandemic. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends!

With more than 3.5 million COVID-19 cases to date and approaching 53,000 deaths, California has been the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States since December. Los Angeles County alone accounts for one third of the cases and 40 percent of the death toll in the state. By any standard, these figures reflect a catastrophic public health emergency.

Instead of carefully applying science to policy, a relentless media and political campaign—spearheaded by the Democratic Party that dominates in the state—has portrayed the recent decline in daily new cases as a sign that it is safe for children to return to school. In doing so, they deliberately conceal all serious scientific studies which demonstrate the recklessness of this policy.

California's Governor Gavin Newsom has reached an agreement with the state Legislature on Senate Bill 86, which is expected to be signed into law by the end of this week. The aim of the bill is to accelerate school reopenings regardless of the level of contagion in each of the state's 58 counties.

In order to access their share of \$2 billion in funding, districts in the most dangerous "purple tier" will have to resume in-person learning for kindergarten to second grade, while those in the "red tier" must fully reopen elementary schools, as well as one full grade level at the middle school and high school levels. Eligible schools that do not reopen by April 1 will lose one percent of their allotted funds for each day they remain fully remote.

The measure specifically compels districts to bring back the most vulnerable layers of the population, including homeless and foster youth, English language learners,

students without internet access and those with disabilities.

On Tuesday, seven more counties were reclassified in the red tier, including San Francisco, El Dorado, Lassen, Modoc, Napa, San Luis Obispo and Santa Clara. Orange County, which neighbors with Los Angeles, is expected to be reclassified to the red tier any day.

In Los Angeles, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has been facilitating the reopening of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the US with roughly 665,000 students. They are copying the same tactics used by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in the recent sellout deal with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which led to the reopening of the third largest district in the country.

After sowing illusions among teachers that no concession was to be made to the detriment of public safety, the CTU reneged on all its pledges and reached a completely unsafe deal with the district which they pressured members to approve.

The UTLA has similarly laid out three conditions for a "safe" return to school: "1. LA County is out of the purple tier. 2. All staff are either fully vaccinated or provided access to full vaccination. 3. Safety conditions are in place in our schools, such as PPE, social distancing, ventilation and a cleaning regimen."

Even if these minimal conditions are met, they will not prevent the spread of the virus between children, who will then infect their families and their broader communities. It is forecast that within days LA County will attain red tier status, which is still a highly elevated rate of infection. Provisions for teachers' vaccination have just been made which will prioritize educators, i.e., non-essential workers, over other workers and the elderly.

The definition of safety conditions is so vague that no trust can be given to whatever measly measures will be implemented in such a short time and with such slim budgets. Proper ventilation systems not only take time to install but would require social resources that the ruling class is not willing to spend and which Newsom's \$2 billion will

nowhere near adequately fund.

In a deliberate effort to divide educators, the UTLA has accepted the early return of some child care and special education programs, along with some athletic and tutoring activities. The union has also signed onto the district's plan to allow educators to provide "voluntary services" beginning this Thursday.

In her recent announcement on February 26, UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz endorsed this reckless move, stating, "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."

Newsom recently held a meeting with LAUSD officials and UTLA leaders to announce the Senate Bill 86 incentive program. One of the LAUSD officials—who wished to remain anonymous to avoid retaliation—revealed to the WSWS that as Newsom was briefing the participants about the bill and "throwing money at LAUSD, UTLA reps remained absolutely quiet and raised no objection whatsoever."

On the same day, Myart-Cruz made a special announcement to the union membership in which she sought to divert attention from the set course of action the union approved by adopting a racist stance: "If you condition funding on the reopening of schools, that money will only go to white and wealthier and healthier school communities that do not have the transmission rates that low-income black and brown communities do."

In other words, she is asking Newsom for more money so that low-income districts can reopen and is demanding a seat at the table. She lamented, "The state's new plan does not supersede UTLA's legal right to bargain working conditions with LAUSD and our continued determination to do so. Bargaining on a hybrid return between the UTLA and LAUSD continues this week." Under Newsom's incentive, districts must consult with employee unions about the safety plans but will not need their consent.

The UTLA is affiliated to the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), which did not hesitate to endorse SB 86. In a statement published Monday, CFT President Jeff Freitas wrote, "The deal that Governor Newsom and legislative leaders have reached is a major step in safely getting to in-person education throughout the state of California."

This week, the union is hosting a series of "organized chapter meetings," which entail no democratic discussion and are simply meant for teachers to vote on whether to accept the three conditions as a prerequisite for reopening. The false dichotomy provided to teachers is whether to go back to classrooms immediately or in a few days, while conditions are objectively and increasingly dangerous.

Under the current life-and-death conditions of the pandemic, the phony vote orchestrated by the UTLA is even more criminal than the few hours that LA teachers were given in 2019 to review and vote on the sellout tentative agreement reached by the union to end the massive teachers strike.

Speaking on this week's voting process, Ric, a fifth grade LAUSD teacher, told the WSWS, "The three conditions and the vote are a fraud. They are telling us that working in red tier is safe! How can it be? Plus, vaccination cannot be limited to teachers: students must be vaccinated as well before we can even discuss a return to the classroom."

In response to the voluntary reopening starting March 4, Ric stated, "This is really a murderous situation in the making. They are encouraging teachers to go back in and divide us. I have no illusions in UTLA: They do not represent our interests. They are a sellout organization, and behind closed doors they bend over every time the establishment demands it."

In light of overwhelming opposition to a return to school by educators and parents, the union represents not the interests of teachers, but of a ruling class that demands the return to work and the reopening of schools in order to sustain its profit drive.

In the face of an uncontrollable growth of social opposition to its murderous policies, including a relentless drive to war in Syria and increasing tensions with China, the ruling class summons the unions as bulwarks to control workers' opposition and prevent outbreaks of social explosion.

With Biden's recent endorsement of the unionization of Alabama Amazon workers, it is becoming increasingly clear that a protracted process of collusion between the state and the unions has found full expression. For decades, the unions have become increasingly corporatist and adopted a program of open labor-management collaboration.

Educators must make every effort to oppose the UTLA's sinister machinations. On Monday, the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee published an important statement, which outlines a strategy to fight back against these murderous policies and their proponents. We urge all Los Angeles teachers to join and help build this rank-and-file committee today as the genuine voice of opposition to the inevitable betrayals that the UTLA will carry out.



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