

Union-sponsored deal announced in Philadelphia to reopen elementary schools on Monday

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7:30p.m. EST Thursday night, March 4, 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.

With the collaboration of the teachers unions, Philadelphia schools will begin in-person classes for about 3,000 kindergarten through second grade students Monday, despite the spread of new and more infectious coronavirus strains that are making their way into the population.

The move comes as the result of a ruling by an “independent” mediator appointed by the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) as part of a Memorandum of Agreement signed last fall. The mediator, Chicago doctor Peter Orris, reviewed the condition of buildings, in particular the ventilation systems, and issued a ruling determining whether they are currently “safe” to reopen or whether rudimentary changes should be made.

According to the decision, 53 school buildings will reopen this Monday for K-2 students. Teachers have been instructed to report to their buildings today to prepare.

Each week, another 50 schools will be opened until March 22, when the school district hopes to have all K-2 schools opened. The school district plans to then follow with special needs students, second language learners, and those in vocational programs, followed by

the opening of other grades.

The move in Philadelphia is part of a nationwide campaign, led by the Biden administration, to reopen all K-8 schools by the end of April. Along with schools in Philadelphia, schools in Pittsburgh are set to reopen April 6. In neighboring Maryland, schools reopened Monday as a result of pressure from Republican governor Larry Hogan. Montgomery County is the only jurisdiction in Maryland that hasn't yet opened for kindergarten, but opened for special education and vocational classes starting yesterday. It will open on March 15 for K-3. Elsewhere in the region, schools in Washington D.C. and Fairfax, Virginia have also been reopened.

Under the continuing pandemic, as well as the threat of new and more dangerous variants of COVID-19, there are no possible conditions where reopening schools for in-person instruction is safe. On the contrary, studies have shown that school closures are among the most effective public health measures to contain the spread of the disease. The claim that ventilation systems can be made safe has been disproven in many scientific studies. CDC school opening guidelines ignore the critical role of ventilation and infection control in classrooms .

The reopening of schools threatens the lives and health of educators, staff, children, parents and community. Pennsylvania has been devastated by the coronavirus. Over 938,000 people have been infected with COVID-19—more than one out of fifteen—and there have been over 24,000 people who have died, the sixth highest in the nation.

Throughout the country, the teachers unions have played the decisive role in containing the opposition of

teachers in order to force through returns to classrooms. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten, according to the *New York Times*, is on the phone for 15 hours a day organizing this campaign.

The new plans to reopen next Monday come after the district and the union were forced repeatedly to shelve earlier plans to reopen, first on February 8, then February 22 and finally March 1, in the face of overwhelming opposition. The Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers (PFT) was compelled to sanction job action on February 8, while teachers and parents took part in a system-wide protest.

This, however, was only so that the union could bide time. The terms of the Memorandum of Agreement, which was itself accepted without a vote by the membership, allow it to force through a deal to reopen schools without even the pretense of a vote.

A series of meetings were held recently between the PFT, Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. and Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney. In addition to PFT president Jerry Jordan, AFT-Pennsylvania president Arthur Steinbery and AFT president Randi Weingarten took part in the process

In a press conference held Monday at Richard Wright Elementary School in North Philadelphia, Mayor Jim Kenney said “We all agree that the time is right to get our young people back into school buildings.” Kenney was joined at the press conference with Superintendent Hite and teachers’ union leaders.

Emphasizing the role of the union in pushing teachers back to work, Weingarten said, “There is a will — teachers, food service workers, they understand that in-school learning is better. They want to be safe, as do the parents of our kids.” In fact, polls conducted by the unions themselves have shown that returning to classrooms is overwhelmingly unpopular among both teachers and parents, particularly in the country's largest working-class school districts.

As a fig-leaf, the union bragged and said that every classroom has been reviewed by PFT’s environmental scientists and that the School District’s plan to use window fans will be replaced with the purchase of air purifiers for rooms that lack adequate ventilation.

Parents and teachers are also being told that students will be “pre-screened” each day at home, wear masks and be kept 6 feet apart. In addition, teachers are in the

process of receiving their first dose of the vaccine. However, most will not have received their second dose nor are measures in place for students and parents to be vaccinated.

Teachers and parents reacted with anger over the reopening plans.

"Shame on the PFT for allowing us to find out this information at the same time as the general public DURING our work day. NO respect for the K-2 teachers at the 53 schools who are returning on Wednesday," said one teacher.

A parent and social worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I understand that our children are struggling to deal with all of the hardships surrounding this pandemic, however at what point are we going to admit that this virus is still a major cause for concern?”

“When you go to work you deserve to be provided with the safest environment possible and for teachers, that is teaching remotely. How did we go from praising teachers for what they do to not listening or speaking over them if they try to express any personal safety concerns? While it is not possible to make every job out there completely safe, we can do that for our school staff.”

In the statement “ Stop the deadly reopening of Philadelphia Schools! ” The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee in fact warned that the PFT decision to call in a mediator would be used to make a few cosmetic changes to building ventilation systems as the excuse for reopening unsafe schools.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is part of a rapidly growing network of committees throughout the United States and worldwide, which fights to mobilize workers independently to fight for a shutdown of schools and nonessential industry to contain the pandemic and defeat the “herd immunity” policies of the capitalist class.



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