

Build rank-and-file committees in all Philadelphia schools to oppose unsafe conditions!

Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
5 March 2021

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the rotten deal reached by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) to return students to classrooms in Philadelphia on Monday.

We call upon all teachers, paraprofessionals, aids and counselors, along with all staff and transportation workers to join our committee as the only organization fighting to unite educators and staff in opposition to the PFT.

The ramming through of the agreement without any discussion or vote underscores the thoroughly anti-democratic and corporatist character of the unions today. From the beginning, PFT President Jerry Jordan, with the support of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, worked with Superintendent William Hite to divert the anger of teachers and get them back into the classroom as soon as possible, using the ruse of bringing in a mediator and supposed ventilation experts.

The decision to resume in-person learning will have deadly consequences for educators, students, parents and the entire community. Over 950,000 people have officially been infected with COVID-19 in Pennsylvania—more than one out of fifteen—and 24,372 people have died, the sixth-highest figure for any state.

Philadelphia and the surrounding counties have been devastated by the pandemic and are one of the hardest hit regions of the country. The city has experienced over 120,000 cases and 3,168 deaths. In each of the neighboring Montgomery, Bucks and Delaware Counties there have been between 41,000 and 55,000 cases with from 1,140 deaths in Bucks County to 1,565 deaths in Montgomery County.

In addition to Philadelphia resuming in-person learning, in surrounding Chester and Delaware Counties school officials have decided to reduce the spacing between students to just three feet in order to accommodate larger class sizes. In Montgomery County, some districts have resumed fully in-person learning for all students four days a week.

The push to reopen schools—now spearheaded by the Democratic Biden administration in collaboration with the teachers unions—coincides with the roll-out of vaccines and the increasing spread of more infectious, lethal and possibly vaccine resistant variants of COVID-19. With proper public health measures, involving the complete closure of schools and nonessential workplaces until the population is vaccinated, the pandemic could

be completely stamped out and needless deaths would be prevented. Instead, the mass reopening of schools and workplaces threatens a new surge in cases and death in the coming weeks.

The claims by the PFT that schools will be made safe are total lies. The 53 buildings that will reopen Monday and the hundreds of other buildings they aim to open in the coming weeks will prove to be deadly centers for the spread of the virus.

Philadelphia educators, students and parents know that years of neglect made the schools dilapidated long before the pandemic. Aged buildings with broken windows, peeling paint, inadequate and often non-functioning heating and cooling systems cannot be fixed in a week. In addition, many buildings are plagued with lead, mold, and asbestos which have caused cancer among teachers and staff.

Replacing window fans with air purifiers does not protect students or staff from the virus. The air purifiers purchased for the schools are designed for living rooms, not large classrooms with 25, 30 or more students.

Before students arrive at schools, many spend 45 minutes or an hour each day on buses in close contact with scores of other students. There is no room for students to sit six feet apart and bus drivers are told to open the windows for ventilation. For many students that take public transportation, contract tracing is all but impossible.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee welcomes the vaccination of teachers who are being compelled to return to schools, but this measure will not prevent the spread of COVID-19 and we will continue to fight to close all schools until the pandemic is contained.

Without the vaccination of students, their parents and the entire community, overcrowded classrooms and buses will become petri dishes for the spread of the pandemic to the community. Moreover, most teachers will not even receive their first dosage of the vaccine before schools reopen, well before the needed two- to six-week period for the buildup of antibodies has taken place.

The actions of Jordan and the PFT were carried out entirely behind the backs of educators, who were never informed about the decision to reopen the schools, let alone given the basic right to review, discuss and then vote on the agreement. The work of the mediator and the supposed PFT ventilation experts was all done behind closed doors. This decision is being forced down the

throats of teachers, with one reporting that they were informed by the PFT that if they refuse to return to the classrooms they will be suspended.

It is vital for educators and staff to ask themselves why are the PFT and AFT playing the role of enforcer for the reopening of the schools? Why, not just in Philadelphia but throughout the country, are the unions collaborating with school districts in forcing teachers back into unsafe classrooms?

Many teachers were shocked and angered when the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which many believed was a democratic and progressive union, undemocratically rejected the overwhelming strike vote of their members and enforced a deadly deal to reopen classrooms for face-to-face instruction last month.

If the AFT and NEA won't stand up when the lives of teachers, parents, students and the community are at risk, they will never fight for their members.

At a fundamental level, the AFT, NEA, and all their state and local affiliates like the CTU, along with unions in every industry, no longer represent the interest of their members. Over a decades-long period they have been transformed into corporatist entities that are tools of the corporations and the state.

Upon taking office, Biden has pushed to reopen schools in order to send parents back to work making profits for Wall Street. The difference between Biden and Trump is not over this underlying aim, but rather their tactics for carrying this out. While Trump used the threat of fascistic violence against the working class, the Biden administration collaborates with the unions to achieve the same aim.

Demonstrating his desire to use the unions against the working class, last Sunday Biden tweeted a video statement fully backing the efforts of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama warehouse. Nearly 6,000 workers at the facility, which is located just outside of Birmingham, are currently voting on whether to join the RWDSU.

Biden is not supporting the unionization of workers at Amazon in Alabama because he is concerned about the horrific working conditions of Amazon workers or their low pay and lack of benefits, but rather because he understands that the unions are instrumental in suppressing the struggles of workers.

For their role in discipline the working class, the union officials are rewarded with a lavish lifestyle through the dues check off system, while overseeing numerous pension and healthcare funds. In 2015, AFT President Randi Weingarten had a total compensation of \$497,118.

Weingarten and National Education Association (NEA) President Becky Pringle have played the decisive role in containing the opposition of teachers in order to force through the reopening of schools. According to the *New York Times*, Weingarten spends 15 hours a day on the phone with the White House, the CDC, local mayors and union heads organizing this campaign.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is the only force organizing the opposition of teachers to the deadly betrayals of the unions. We are part of a growing network of committees throughout the US and worldwide, which are

democratically controlled by their members. These committees work to unite educators with Amazon and other transportation workers, workers in auto and basic industry, and all sections of the working class, to fight for a shutdown of schools and nonessential industry in order to contain the pandemic. We demand the following:

- For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools and all nonessential production to stop the spread of COVID-19.

- End the undemocratic collusion between the PFT and the district. Educators must have the right to vote on any plan to reopen schools.

- All decisions about school openings and closures must be overseen solely by rank-and-file educators and parents in consultation with scientific experts of their choosing.

- Full funding for internet access, technology and all resources needed for high-quality remote instruction.

- Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children.

- No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home.

- For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers.

While opposing the reckless reopening of schools, we recognize that in many cases teachers are being forced back in. Under these conditions, we will continue to fight for school closures while demanding that the following safety measures be universally implemented:

- Districts and schools must report numbers (not names to ensure privacy) of students, staff, and associated household members diagnosed with COVID-19 and any associated deaths, which must be tracked through mandatory contact tracing.

- The immediate modernization of HVAC systems for all schools.

- Nurses at every school with daily testing of students, teachers and staff.

- Full and accurate reporting of all cases among students, staff and associated households, along with robust contact tracing.

- The mass hiring of teachers and bus drivers to reduce class sizes and bus capacity to no more than 10 students.

Join and help build this committee and take up these demands today by signing up at wsws.org/edsafety/



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact