Teachers expose unsafe conditions as schools reopen in Philadelphia

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The Pennsylvanian Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee stands for the end of all in-person instruction and the closing of all nonessential businesses until the pandemic is contained. R*egister here* to join us for an online meeting *this Thursday and* read our latest *statement here. To help expose conditions in your school, send photos and comments to educators@wsws.org.*

Across Philadelphia, 53 schools reopened Monday for roughly 3,000 pre-Kindergarten through second grade students, whose teachers had been ordered back to work last Wednesday in order to get their classrooms ready. The reopenings take place after the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) struck a rotten deal with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) to reopen schools without teachers even voting on the plan. Yesterday, both parties announced that 45 more schools will reopen next week.

Under the agreement reached by the PFT and SDP, schools were certified "safe" by the union. However, testimony posted on social media by teachers, nurses and parents points out just how unsafe the schools really are. Upon returning to their classrooms Monday morning, Philadelphia educators found mouse droppings, insufficient personal protective equipment and expired test kits, among other unsafe conditions.

One teacher posted a photo of mouse droppings in her classroom on social media, writing, "My school is open. I had students today for the first time. My fan was removed and replaced with an air purifier. However, my classroom was not cleaned (like basic summer cleaning cleaned) and we were given the impression that buildings had been deep cleaned.

"On Friday, I spent hours cleaning my room that was full of mouse feces and other dirt and debris, some of which was on the window sill and heater!!!! Mouse feces were all around the sink!! Most of the other teachers in my school had similar stories, and I've heard the same from around the city."

In one of the most disturbing posts, a school nurse wrote that the COVID-19 test kits they were sent expire on Thursday and are not being stored properly. Instead of sending new test kits, the nurses were told to extend their expiration date.

She wrote that Childrens Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) "originally promised to send new tests, which were supposed to arrive by the time the kids did. Instead, we were suddenly told that they are 'extending' the expiration date of the tests until June." She concluded, "If we can't trust the results of these tests, it could put many lives at risk."

The reopening of the Philadelphia schools for in-person learning during the pandemic is a monstrous decision which will only lead to a spike in COVID-19 cases and the needless death and injury of students, teachers, staff and the community.

In a press conference Monday at Juniata Park Academy in North Philadelphia, Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney and schools Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. hailed the reopening of classrooms.

"Although the pandemic is far from over, beginning to welcome some of our students back is a little bit of a light at the end of the tunnel," Hite said. He failed to explain why placing students and teachers in a setting known to promote the transmission of COVID-19 is a "light."

For his part, Mayor Kenney justified the reopening of the schools by pointing to the difficulty young children face learning remotely. "I often wondered about our youngest students and their socialization and academics," Kenney said.

While both Hite and Kenney posture as concerned

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over the problems facing children during the pandemic, the fact is that the Democratic Party has dominated Philadelphia politics for decades and is responsible for drastic conditions in Philadelphia schools, with mold, broken windows and asbestos.

The PFT joined the district in hailing the return to in-person learning. Essentially doing public relations work for the district, the PFT promoted photos of immaculate classrooms on their Facebook page. These photos were contradicted by scores of posts by rank-and-file educators depicting the unsafe conditions within the schools.

"We feel lied to and betrayed," wrote one teacher next to photos of mouse droppings throughout her classroom. "Seeing the condition of our school. Went in today and furniture was not cleaned, mouse droppings are everywhere. With these conditions, how are teachers supposed to have their rooms cleaned and rearranged to be ready to admit students on Monday?"

Another posted, "Dollar store fans and no air purifier in sight at this 'safe' room at Munoz-Marin today."

Teachers and paraprofessionals pointed to the fact that hand sanitizer dispensers were empty, bathrooms in disrepair and filthy. Teachers reported mold stains on their ceilings and walls, and that desks were not removed to meet social distancing requirements.

Even a photo on the School District's Facebook page showed a child with her mask off. It was quickly removed as people commented on the difficulty of expecting such young children to wear masks and stay six feet apart.

The reopening of Philadelphia public schools is the direct result of the actions of the teachers' union. After mass opposition from teachers, the PFT stepped in to negotiate a deal to bring in so-called ventilation experts to certify the schools for reopening.

Working behind the backs of the teachers, these experts certified schools to be opened without ever setting foot in the buildings, instead just reviewing documents. This agreement was never brought to the teachers for a vote.

Under the agreement, all Pre-K to second grade classrooms are set to open by March 22. The school district then plans to bring in English as a second language students, followed by vocational education, with negotiations for high grade levels continuing during this period.

The claim that schools can be reopened safely has been disproven in study after study. Most recently, K-12 schools have been shown to be the number one source of COVID-19 infections in Michigan.

Nearly a million people have contracted COVID-19 in Pennsylvania and there have been an astonishing 24,500 deaths. The state's death rate is higher than both Florida and California, falling only behind New York. The number of new cases has gone down since January, when there were over 10,000 new cases a day, but there are still over 2,000 new cases statewide every day, and the more contagious variants are becoming increasingly prevalent.

The reopening of Philadelphia schools is part of a larger drive by the Biden administration to return to in-person learning throughout the country. After Trump and the Republicans spearheaded this policy last fall, Biden and the Democrats have taken up the mantle of reopening schools as part of the broader effort to get people back to work producing profits for Wall Street.

At a fundamental level, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA), and all their state and local affiliates, 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.

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 urge all Philadelphia educators to sign up today to join and help build this committee as your organization !

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