Los Angeles teachers union endorses reckless tentative agreement to reopen schools

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11 March 2021

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees are organizing the enormous opposition among educators, parents and students to the homicidal reopening of schools throughout the region. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends to attend our next meeting at 2 p.m. PST this Saturday!

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) teachers union announced a tentative agreement (TA) Tuesday to begin reopening the second largest school district in the country for in-person learning. The TA still has to be ratified by the UTLA membership and approved by the school board.

If the agreement is approved, elementary students will return to classrooms on April 19 while secondary students will return in late April. The April 19 date was determined based on the time it would take teachers to receive both a first and second dose of the Moderna and Pfizer coronavirus vaccines before returning to school.

The deal stipulates that preschool students will have fully in-person instruction, while elementary students will be divided into two cohorts, with the first attending school in the morning and the second in the afternoon.

Under terms agreed to by the UTLA and the district last October, student athletic programs have already been opened for in-person training and competition while special education, tutoring, child care and counseling are also now in-person.

In a joint press conference Wednesday with LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner, UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz announced, “This agreement is the result of months of complicated work at the bargaining table. It has taken time and painstaking effort to ensure we got an agreement that is right for the entire LAUSD community.” Both Beutner and Myart-Cruz also released a joint statement that falsely claims their deal will provide “safety in schools.”

The agreement follows a sham vote sponsored by the UTLA last week in which teachers were asked to approve organizing “resistance” to a return to in-person learning if three conditions were not met. The conditions included full vaccinations for teachers, coronavirus infection rates in LA county dropping from the highest “purple tier” to the still deadly “red tier” of infections, along with sanitary and social distancing provisions, including PPE, masks for all teachers and students and sanitizing on school sites.

Teachers voted in favor of organizing resistance if the conditions weren’t met, however, the UTLA itself knew the conditions were not only inadequate, but that the county was on track to meet them anyway. In other words, the union allowed the district to specify the conditions for reopening and issued an empty threat of “resistance” if the district failed to meet their own conditions for reopening.

Only four days after the UTLA finalized its vote, they announced the reopening plan, timed to coincide with an announcement Tuesday by the Los Angeles County Department of Health that the county had begun moving into the red tier. Also on Tuesday evening, California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom gave his State of the State address in the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball stadium, declaring that the pandemic in California was all but over. “The building blocks of our recovery are in place,” Newsom said, “And now we are leading the way out of this pandemic.”

Just this weekend, Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, said on *Meet the Press*, “we are in the eye of the hurricane right now. It appears that things are going very well… But what we know is about to come upon us is the situation with this B.1.1.7 variant … that today is wreaking havoc in parts of Europe, 27 countries seeing significant cases with this.” He concluded, “we do have to keep America as safe as we can from this virus by not letting up on any of the public health measures we’ve taken.”

In addition to more virulent strains of the coronavirus like the B.1.1.7 variant circulating among the population, LA County in fact still officially remains in the most severe purple tier of infection, not the red tier. Because the county’s state-adjusted rate of new daily COVID-19 cases dropped to 5.2 per 100,000 below the threshold of 7, it now qualifies for red tier status provided that it can maintain those numbers for two consecutive weeks.

Only last week, however, the state changed its guidelines in a maneuver that was clearly aimed at opening LAUSD and other districts for in-person learning. Now, the state is allowing an immediate transition to the red tier once a certain number of vaccines are delivered in a county’s lowest-income communities hardest hit by the coronavirus, without waiting to achieve the two-week testing metric. For those LA communities, the state has delivered 1,897,280 doses out of a required 2 million, which it expects to reach by this weekend.

The TA to reopen LA schools calls for daily testing of all

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students and staff before the return to school and states that "weekly COVID testing will be provided thereafter." It will also require the wearing of masks for all students, staff and visitors at schools, as well as requiring social distancing of at least six feet.

The union and district promise to keep schools "clean and safe," but this should be treated with the utmost skepticism. When Philadelphia schools reopened for in-person learning on Monday, teachers documented numerous examples of unsanitary conditions on school campuses including mouse droppings.

Philadelphia teachers, like their counterparts in Los Angeles, were also promised regular coronavirus testing for students and staff. Once they returned to campuses, however, school nurses found testing kits that had already expired and were effectively worthless.

Moreover, claims that students will not transmit the virus have been proven completely false. To cite only one example, K-12 schools are now the number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks in the state of Michigan after reopenings took place there.

In spite of these dangers, state and local officials are pushing forward with reopenings at the behest of the Biden administration, which pledged to open all K-8 schools for in-person learning by the end of April. Schools across the West Coast are seen as among the last holdouts that must be quickly reopened before working class resistance emerges, regardless of the cost in suffering and death.

In addition to LAUSD, neighboring districts in Long Beach, Pasadena, Torrance and others have also reached deals to reopen schools. Clark County School District in Las Vegas, the fifth-largest in the US, announced a return to in-person learning last week. School reopening plans are also underway in the Sweetwater Union High School District in San Diego, school districts in Riverside County, California, as well as in San Francisco, across Oregon, and in Seattle, Washington.

These announcements thoroughly vindicate the analysis of the school reopening drive made by the *World Socialist Web Site.* We have consistently warned that not only would the ruling class stop at nothing to open schools during the worst pandemic in a century, but that they would find ready and willing partners for this effort in the trade unions. While doing nothing to oppose the drive by Trump and the Republicans to reopen schools last fall, upon Biden's election the unions have eagerly facilitated school reopenings everywhere this spring.

The deadly betrayal orchestrated by the UTLA follows the playbook written by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) when it proceeded with plans to reopen the country's third largest school district. The CTU also offered a vote in which members expressed overwhelming opposition to a return to in-person learning, only to then negotiate an agreement with the district behind teachers' backs. The union then held information sessions in which teachers were not allowed to ask any questions and then proceeded with the school reopenings anyway.

Like in Chicago, the immense gulf between the real sentiments of teachers and the politics of the trade unions could hardly be any wider.

The UTLA posted a video on its Facebook account announcing the agreement Tuesday night. While union President Cecily Myart-Cruz and chief negotiations officer Arlene Inouye tried to spin the reopening as a "safe, healthy and science-based return to schools," teachers themselves issued an outpouring of hundreds of angry comments denouncing the sellout.

One teacher stated simply, "They just threw us all under the bus!!" Another commented, "Red tier is still very dangerous for a 'safe return.' Way to go UTLA on letting us down once again."

A former UTLA representative could not contain her anger at the sellout, saying, "I am feeling betrayed. Super betrayed… what you sent last night is freaking garbage… Freaking selling us down river! I was so proud of our union, what a betrayal. Oh and I was a UTLA rep. I believe in representation but they are betraying us. Absolute betrayal!!! Totally unacceptable. Same old story. We are not their priority. They don't have our backs."

When a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party intervened on this Facebook page to agree with the teachers' criticisms and encourage involvement in the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, he was banned from the UTLA's page. Similar censorship was widespread in 2019, when the UTLA worked to ram through their sellout contract to end the powerful teachers' strike.

The struggle against the UTLA's betrayal is now a life-and-death question, and every effort must be made to oppose the homicidal reopening of schools. Only the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unify educators with parents, students and the entire working class, across district and state lines, in preparations for a nationwide general strike. We urge all those opposed to school reopenings to make plans to attend this Saturday's meeting of our committee, in coordination with similar committees across the West Coast. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends!

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