

New York City moves to reopen high schools as dangerous COVID-19 variants spread

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The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee fights to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. Register today to attend our next meeting this Wednesday, March 17 at 7pm EST!

Nearly a year after educators forced New York City public schools to close by threatening to conduct wildcat sickout strikes as the coronavirus began its deadly spread, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio is moving forward with plans to resume in-person learning on March 22 at the district's 488 high schools. The reopening occurs under conditions in which more transmissible variants of COVID-19 now make up the majority of active cases in the city.

Well before de Blasio's official announcement on March 8, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) indicated that it is collaborating with the mayor in opening buildings to high school students. UFT president Michael Mulgrew told a meeting of the union's Executive Board, "We are in conversations about high school openings. We have a formula and know how many people we need."

Mulgrew and the UFT apparently do not have a formula for how many educators, school staff, students and parents will become sick or die from exposure to the coronavirus in the coming weeks and months after being sent back to school buildings.

To date, over 30,000 people in New York City have died from COVID-19, while the total number of cases stands at 773,306. As of Sunday, the seven-day average citywide test positivity rate was 6.4 percent and much higher in many working class neighborhoods. The positivity rate in Ozone Park in Queens, for example, was 12.6 percent.

De Blasio's senior adviser for public health, Dr. Jay Varma, announced on Wednesday that 51 percent of cases in the city were attributable to the B.1.1.7 and B.1.526, variants, first discovered in the United Kingdom and in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights, respectively.

Varma said the city's preliminary analysis suggests that B.1.526, spreads more quickly than the wild type of the virus, and that it may be similar in infectiousness to B.1.1.7, which has become the dominant variant throughout Europe in the past several months.

A veteran high school teacher commented on these recent developments in a statement to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"New York City cases have plateaued in the 3,000-4,000 range. More than 60 people die each day from COVID in the city. While the rest of the country has seen a decrease in cases, and even New York state has seen a decrease in cases, New York City cases are now rising.

"It is clear that variant spread is driving the higher numbers here, that we do not have anywhere near enough vaccinated to stem the spread, and that a deadly surge like the UK or the EU experienced with B.1.1.7 may occur in NYC in April.

"Health officials should be readying the city for another surge, this one caused by the variants. Instead, the mayor reopens high schools, says he is entertaining loosening school closure rules for COVID, and encouraging New Yorkers to eat in restaurants and go to the movies. Just as the mayor killed New Yorkers last spring by dithering on closures in early March, he will likely kill more this spring by obstinately reopening in the face of variant spread."

Barring the intervention of the working class, this scenario is likely to unfold. The de Blasio administration plans to cluster 55,000 students and 17,000 educators in the district's high school buildings, which if implemented will lead to an acceleration of infections and the unnecessary deaths of educators, parents, students and working people throughout the city.

The move to open high schools follows the reopening of the city's middle schools on February 25 and the expansion of restaurants' indoor dining capacity from 35 to 50 percent on March 19. It would be followed by the resumption of school sports in April, with competition season running through the summer.

The reaction of New York educators and parents to the reopening of high schools under these circumstances has been one of anger and foreboding. The degree of mistrust among educators for the so-called safety protocols that the city has in place for open school buildings is high.

One teacher from Brooklyn told the WSWs, "Testing 20 percent of all school populations is ineffective. It should be 100 percent. I'm counting on transmission increasing since teens will be teens and aren't mature enough to realize they should

keep socially distant. In addition, physical fights are inevitable, so masks will be torn off. Teens will spit on each other and on school staff.”

Another city educator added, “Even with many teachers vaccinated, we are going to be complicit in killing grandparents and potentially killing and shortening the lifespans of parents and children. Many high school parents have already reported to admin that their blended students will not be returning. So, what is the point of going back now? It is theater.”

One public school parent, Cynthia, stated bluntly, “It’s murder.”

On Thursday, four Democratic and three Republican members of the City Council pressed the additional demand that summer school be made available as an option to all students, ostensibly to make up for learning deficiencies over the past year. This has been one of the main proposals of the new Chancellor of Schools, Meisha Porter.

De Blasio’s efforts are in line with the broader push by the American ruling class in general and the Biden administration in particular to keep nonessential workplaces open, in order to maintain the flow of profits to the coffers of the financial elite. A key element of this strategy is ensuring that students be allowed to return to school so that their parents can be pressured to return to work.

There has been immense pressure on New York City, the largest school district in the US with over 1.1 million students, to serve as an example for districts across the country. This has been combined with a concerted propaganda campaign, spearhead by the *New York Times*, to portray the city’s reopenings as successful and “safe.”

On Sunday the *Times* published a series of interviews with high-school students lamenting the loss of the “golden hours” after school and before dinner, during which students normally engage in extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs.

While students are undoubtedly under enormous stress from missing such activities, the purpose of the article is to persuade the public that all school activities must return to normal to ensure students’ mental health. It is not an accident that de Blasio has also announced that training for school sports will resume next month.

Dr. Varma, de Blasio’s adviser, wrote a paper published in the journal *Pediatrics* on Tuesday that attempts to portray in-school viral transmission as relatively low. On Wednesday, the education news site Chalkbeat published an article amplifying the voices of four “public health experts” who agree with the study.

The UFT has been indispensable to the ruling class in reopening New York City schools. In early September, the union postured as though it would call a strike against unsafe reopening, only to reveal it had prepared a backroom deal with de Blasio to delay reopenings by a week and a half. The delay was then extended to September 29 for K-5 and K-8 schools and October 1 for middle and high schools.

Schools were closed again on November 17, as a temporary maneuver to quell mounting opposition among educators, parents, and students. The shutdown took place after the citywide seven-day rolling average test positivity rate surpassed the 3 percent threshold agreed upon by Mulgrew and de Blasio, which was immediately thrown out to allow for the gradual reopening of schools beginning in December.

The role of the UFT and de Blasio in New York City is in keeping with the critical role played by the teachers unions and the Democratic Party in school reopenings across the US, above all the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA). The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), under the leadership of the pseudo-left Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), signed an agreement with Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to open schools last month despite widespread opposition among educators.

All those who promote the teachers unions as organizations that can be pushed to oppose school reopenings, such as the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) in the UFT, are politically misleading educators.

MORE was completely silent about the struggle of Chicago teachers and has tweeted the fictitious narrative that de Blasio is opening the schools because he is bowing to the wishes of white parents. The central role of the Democratic Party in reopening is left unmentioned because the leadership of MORE is in basic political agreement with the Democrats.

The conclusion that New York educators must draw from the past year and the present drive to reopen high schools amid an all but certain resurgence of the pandemic is that the Democratic Party, the trade unions, and all of their pseudo-left supporters are irredeemably hostile to the interests of the working class.

Educators need new, fighting organizations. They must seek to build rank-and-file safety committees to organize a general strike by New York workers to halt reopening and save lives. The New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will meet on Wednesday, March 17 at 7 p.m. to discuss these developments and outline a fighting strategy for educators, parents, students and the broader working class. We urge all those in the tri-state area interested in this perspective to register today and invite your coworkers and friends.



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