

Build rank-and-file committees to stop the drive to reopen schools across the West Coast!

West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees
14 March 2021

The following statement was unanimously approved by educators, parents and other workers from California, Oregon, Washington and other states who attended a meeting held Saturday by the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees. We urge all those opposed to the reopening of schools throughout this region to sign up today to join and help build committees in your district and state!

Over the past two weeks, school districts across the West Coast have struck deals with local teachers unions to reopen schools for in-person instruction as the pandemic rages out of control. Teachers, school staff, students and families must oppose this reckless policy and fight to keep schools closed in order to contain the pandemic and eradicate COVID-19.

Study after study has shown that remote learning is one of the most effective means of reducing COVID-19 transmission. Without developing rank-and-file committees to coordinate emergency action independently of the teachers unions and both big business parties, given the slow pace of vaccinations and the wholesale reopening of schools and non-essential workplaces, the pandemic is likely to surge again in the coming weeks as more infectious and lethal variants become dominant.

The Democratic Party dominates politics on the West Coast with the support of the unions. It has proven to be just as ruthless as its Republican counterparts in Florida or Texas in the drive to reopen schools.

In California, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed Assembly Bill 86, which incentivizes school reopenings regardless of the level of viral transmission, encouraging elementary schools to begin reopening by April 1 with higher grades to follow.

On Friday, Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee announced that he will soon issue an executive order banning fully remote instruction. This follows a similar order issued on March 5 by Oregon's Democratic Governor Kate Brown which also requires districts to offer at least some in-person instruction by March 29.

Upon taking office, the Biden administration has rapidly implemented its stated aim of reopening the majority of all the nation's schools by the end of April. This policy has the full support of the teachers unions, with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten telling the *New York Times* that she spends 15 hours a day on the phone with the White House, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local mayors and teachers union officials.

A critical turning point in this campaign was the aggressive push to reopen the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), in which the pseudo-left Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) played the critical role of pressuring its members to support the deal, which passed by a narrow margin of only 54 percent voting in favor.

In the aftermath of this betrayal, local unions have struck deals to reopen schools in Philadelphia, Detroit, Memphis and other Democrat-led cities. The West Coast has been the last front in this national campaign, with the unions in Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and other cities all reaching deals in the past two weeks.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)—the second largest

in the US, with nearly 665,000 students—struck a deal on Tuesday with the pseudo-left United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which followed the same playbook crafted by the CTU. Under the tentative agreement, which teachers will vote on this week, elementary school students would return to the classroom by April 19, with secondary students returning by the end of the month.

Los Angeles County remains in the most severe “purple tier” of transmission after being a global epicenter of the pandemic this winter, with over 22,000 Angelenos dying from COVID-19 in the past year. The UTLA and district are now trying to bully teachers into ratifying their deal with death. Statewide, the California Teachers Association (CTA) and California Federation of Teachers (CFT) have both praised Newsom's demand for in-person instruction.

In order to save lives, Los Angeles educators must take a stand and vote down the agreement, but they must be joined by workers across the region and country. The concerted, bipartisan push from President Biden down to local school boards to resume in-person instruction during the pandemic must be met with a conscious and coordinated resistance from the working class.

The pandemic can be contained and eradicated but only through an aggressive campaign of public health measures, including the closure of all school sites and non-essential businesses, financial support to workers and small business owners, increased funding for health care infrastructure and vaccine distribution.

The drive to resume in-person instruction is based on a fundamental falsehood that must be exposed.

Myth: Children do not readily transmit COVID-19

In a political move, only days after the CTU's betrayal in Chicago, the CDC revised its guidelines to state that school sites can be safely reopened “at any level of community transmission.” This is based on ignoring a consistent international body of evidence that in-person instruction is a major source of COVID-19 infections.

A review of international government interventions published in *Nature Human Behaviour* showed school closures as second only to barring small gatherings in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Last year, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study showing statewide school closures in the United States resulted in a 60 percent decrease in COVID incidence and mortality.

A more recent study in *The Lancet* measured the impact of opening or closing schools in 131 different countries. It found that after one month, halting in-person instruction was associated with a 20 percent decline in the reproduction number (the average number of people infected by each new case of SARS-CoV-2), while reopening school sites was associated

with a 20 percent increase.

The results of these peer-reviewed studies have been further confirmed in practice. In Michigan, where much of the state has resumed in-person instruction, schools have become the leading source of new COVID-19 outbreaks. In the first week of March, K-12 schools were the site of 47 new outbreaks, with day cares and youth programs, like sports, accounting for another 24.

The AFT has claimed that with enough safety measures implemented at the local level, in-person instruction will not increase transmission. This is fundamentally false because the pandemic is not limited by district. Even the most comprehensive mitigation measures would only be effective when there is minimal community transmission, which is not the case throughout the West Coast and globally.

Once transmission levels are near-zero, effective mitigation measures would require large reductions in class sizes, modern facilities with effective air filtration, keeping children in cohorts that do not share space at lunch or recess and other measures. This would require hundreds of billions of dollars in new funding and the mass recruitment of additional teachers and staff to limit class sizes, far beyond the one-time funding provided by the latest federal stimulus package.

Without those measures—and no state has even suggested implementing them—the risk might be mitigated in isolated well-funded schools, while the disease runs rampant throughout the chronically underfunded public education system.

The more COVID-19 cases that occur, the more likely it is that new variants will evolve that are more infectious or deadly. It is even possible for new strains to evolve which current vaccines are no longer effective against.

The British variant B.1.1.7 has grown from one to four percent of the viruses in the US analyzed four weeks ago to 30-40 percent now. This variant is significantly more infectious in school settings and between 40 and 80 percent more transmissible overall. The homegrown California variant, CAL.20C, which is associated with higher viral loads in those infected, grew from three percent of cases in California in November to more than half in January.

Although daily new cases have been declining, the seven-day average across the country remains over 55,000 as these more infectious variants take hold. This led Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, to declare, “We are in the eye of the hurricane right now.” In order to prevent these variants from causing another deadly surge, he argued, “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.”

Any claim by politicians, school districts or unions that children do not significantly transmit COVID-19 and that schools can be safely reopened at present is a lie.

Build rank-and-file committees to stop the reopening of schools and save lives!

On the West Coast, educators have formed rank-and-file safety committees in Los Angeles, San Diego and Northern California, with more in formation in Oregon, Washington and Utah. These committees are the only force organizing educators, parents and students in opposition 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 health care and basic industry, and all sections of the

working class, to fight for a shutdown of schools and non-essential industry in order to contain the pandemic. We demand the following:

- For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools and all non-essential production to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- 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 at home with their children.
- No loss of income for educators and staff members 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.
- Every school building must be provided with a carbon dioxide sensor to monitor air exchange, and whenever levels surpass 1,000 parts per million that building must be emptied to allow fresh air to recirculate.
- Nurses at every school, and 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, school employees and bus drivers to reduce class sizes and bus capacity to no more than 10 students.

All educators, parents, students and workers in agreement with these core demands should make the decision today to join and help build a rank-and-committee in your school district or neighborhood today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact