"How is anything 'deep cleaned' when you look in the corner and see feces?"

Norfolk, Virginia teacher exposes unsafe conditions as schools reopen

Ed Hightower
15 March 2021

In accordance with guidelines from Virginia's Democratic Governor Ralph Northam, public schools in Norfolk reopened their doors to elementary students on Monday, March 15. Middle school students in the Norfolk Public Schools (NPS) are set to resume in-person learning on April 12, followed by high school students on April 26.

The reopening plan implements a hybrid model and divides all classes into Group A and Group B in an effort to keep no more than 10 students in the classroom at once. Every week each group attends two days of in-person and two days online classes, while educators will have to simultaneously teach in-person and remote lessons.

NPS required teachers to return to school buildings and begin preparations for in-person learning on March 1. The city of Norfolk has had over 15,000 cases of COVID-19 and 225 deaths, while the state of Virginia as a whole has seen nearly 600,000 cases and nearly 10,000 deaths.

This reporter spoke with a 15-year veteran NPS teacher about conditions before and during the pandemic. She wished to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions to herself and colleagues. Part of the discussion concerned the role of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers (NFT), a local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose President Randi Weingarten has played a pivotal role in the nationwide campaign to reopen schools under the Biden administration.

Ed Hightower: Can you tell me about the NFT leadership?

Norfolk Teacher: My understanding is that Thomas Calhoun has been the leader for quite some time, and he seems to be kind of, well, he almost works against people. There was a big meeting several weeks ago when it was made known that we were going back into the classrooms prior to having our full complement of vaccines. There were a lot of people on a Zoom call, and he just kind of seemed angry. He was pretty willing to yell at people. He pretty much came right out and when someone asked, "What are you doing for us?" he responded, "Quit asking me that. What are you doing for yourself?"

And the thought that we had was, aren't we paying you to be an organizer? Isn't this supposed to be your strong point, that you can organize the community? And he said something like, "Well, if you cared, you would have been calling me over the summer." And I *had called* and left a voicemail that was not returned until October or November. So I don't know, I've heard people shake their heads that his heart really isn't in it.

EH: His pocketbook might not be in it either.

NT: Yes, I've heard he makes a lot of money, close to $100,000.

EH: The public sector unions often say in the Southeastern states, the "right to work" states, that they can't strike. But they seem to do a lot of demonstrating at state capitals to pressure legislatures. They say, "Remember in November," and tell teachers to vote for local Democrats. But it strikes me as odd that the unions themselves were created in conditions of illegality, and people were willing to break ridiculous

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and unjust laws.

It seems especially reckless that there's no call for strike action in the face of extreme danger from the biggest health crisis in generations. There's no sense that we should picket. Maybe we should make an appeal to other layers of workers here and strike because we need vaccines, proper ventilation, maximum safety. Nothing like that has been proposed by the trade unions.

NT: Nothing. No, I have not seen anything. And when people mention striking, at least what Calhoun said at this virtual meeting was, "Don't get me going down that road. I've mentioned that in the past, and you guys won't commit to that."

So it's like he's already made up his mind that there's no rank-and-file willingness to strike, so he's not even going to bring it up. But [laughs] he just seemed angry. He seemed angry. And this is my first time talking with this guy, and I'm kind of shocked.

EH: It sounds like, on the one hand, he was saying you couldn't strike, there's no rank-and-file militancy. But on the other hand, he's angry at workers who are being … militant.

NT: [Laughing] Right.

EH: Can you speak about the cleanliness of your school facilities?

NT: There's a lot of mice; there's a lot of vermin. And the big thing right before the shutdown was that they found lead in the water supply. Then we have the shutdown, and there's no discussion about whatever happened to the lead in all of the buildings. We were told they were testing the water at all Norfolk Public Schools because lead was found in it. What happened to that? Is it safe to drink the water now? You're not going to get any information on that, they've totally dropped it. And the line that they're telling you is how clean it's going to be because of some fogger.

And they are quick to tell you that "sanitary" is different from "clean." So there can be animal droppings in your classroom, but they're still going to say it was "deep cleaned" because they came in with the antiviral fogger machine. To me that just sounds asinine. How is anything "deep cleaned" when you look in the corner and see feces?

EH: I think that does strain credulity.

NT: One of the schools, I think it was Sherwood Forest, was shut down over so much mice infestation. There was a huge scandal, and that was last fall, I think. It's not like they don't know that these buildings are old, and that there are visible holes where vermin can come in and out of the building. But it's clean and it's safe!

EH: I think there was a scandal just before the pandemic about a school that basically had no heat at all in the winter.

NT: I believe it. I've worked at other schools where it's so bloody hot and there's no air conditioning. One year an air conditioning unit blew up, and we stayed in the room at 85 and 90 degrees for six weeks.

EH: Maybe there is a difference between "cold" and "sanitary cold." In any case, I believe you attended an online meeting the other weekend put on by the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. What did you think?

NT: I listened to some of it. It sounds like they have a lot of support, and they have grassroots commitments. And they've got this Dr. Mateus, who's giving them the information, and it sounds like they're on the right path.

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