

Los Angeles and Oakland educators to vote this week on unions' deadly school reopening plans

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The Democratic Party–led drive to reopen West Coast schools has greatly intensified over the past week. Beginning Thursday, teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) will be voting on an agreement to return to in-person learning in the second largest school district in the US. On Sunday, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) announced that it too had reached a reopening deal with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), which is pending a vote of both rank-and-file teachers and the school board later this week.

An agreement was also reached in late February between San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) and the San Diego Education Association (SDEA) to open schools for in-person learning on April 12. The San Diego agreement reduces the allowable distance between students from six feet to five feet to accommodate more students. On the national level, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is also considering lowering its social distancing recommendation from six feet to three feet, as part of the Biden administration's campaign to send the maximum number of students possible back into classrooms.

A similar agreement for an April 12 reopening was also reached in the nearby Sweetwater Union High School District. These reopening announcements were followed by a ruling by San Diego Superior Court Judge Cynthia Freeland, who declared that schools could reopen even if the county where they are located is still in the state's most restrictive "purple tier," which denotes more than 10 daily new cases per 100,000 population and a greater than 8 percent test positivity rate.

In late February, the United Educators of San Francisco announced an agreement to reopen immediately after the county began entering the still dangerous "red tier" of infections.

In the Pacific Northwest, Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee announced an emergency order requiring K–5 students to begin hybrid instruction by April 5. This followed an executive order by Oregon's Democratic Governor Kate Brown to open all K–5 classes by March 29 and to reopen grades 6–12 by April 19.

The latest reopening agreement in Oakland includes a return to in-person classes on March 30 for pre-Kindergarten through second-grade students. This would be followed by a second phase involving grades 3–5 on April 19. The agreement in Los Angeles includes reopening for elementary school students on April 19, while secondary school students would return later in the month.

In the case of the secondary school openings in Los Angeles, those students would sit in the same classroom on campus all day while continuing to conduct classes over Zoom. In other words, the real aim of the agreement between the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and LAUSD is not to address the pedagogical shortcomings of remote instruction as both parties claimed, but instead to bring children back to schools in a manner that will offer no educational advantages whatsoever over remote learning, simply so that their parents can in turn go back to work.

One LAUSD parent remarked to the *Los Angeles Times*, "Essentially we are asking our kids to go to school, sit in a classroom, wear headphones and be supervised by a teacher instructing via Zoom."

The deadly agreements reached by the UTLA and OEA recall what took place in 2019, when powerful teachers' strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland were isolated and defeated by the same union leaderships that present themselves as "radical" while remaining totally subservient to the Democrats and the capitalist system. Now, under life-and-death conditions, these pseudo-left unions seek to enforce school reopenings that they know will lead to infections and deaths among educators, parents and throughout their communities.

At an OEA union meeting Tuesday involving representatives from each school, the entire OEA executive board called for a return to in-person learning, falsely claiming that Oakland teachers are isolated and that they had to agree with the district's proposal. The tentative agreement includes a hard return date of April 14 for all teachers in all grades regardless of the transmission rate, but nothing on work schedules or important safety measures. Chastity Garcia, an OEA vice president, tried to browbeat teachers by stating, "if we vote no, we lose all of our leverage because we'd no longer be bargaining in good faith over these issues."

The site representatives council voted 49 percent to 45 against recommending the TA. To carry their struggle forward, Oakland teachers must organize independently of the union leadership that unanimously recommended the sellout deal.

The UTLA and OEA are following the strategy outlined by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and have launched public pressure campaigns to browbeat teachers into voting "yes" on their respective agreements. OEA President Keith Brown claimed earlier this week, "We reached a tentative agreement that is just,

equitable, and most importantly, safe.” UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz claimed that the agreement her union reached represented a “gold standard” of union negotiations, adding, “We were able to hold the line until it was safe.”

What both unions are actually doing, like their counterparts across the country, is in fact “holding the line” against escalating teacher anger and opposition. From the point of view of the districts, the city governments and the unions, the window to reopen schools is rapidly closing. The longer reopenings are postponed, the more teachers and workers will independently organize opposition, especially as COVID-19 cases begin to climb once again.

Responding to a number of angry and frustrated teachers on the UTLA’s Facebook page hoping for a delay until safer conditions were met after the agreement announcement, union lead negotiator Arlene Inouye replied peremptorily, “The option is not to remain closed—we must have a plan for returning to physical schools.”

The UTLA’s agreement also calls for an hour of additional instruction per day without any pay increase. Teachers have also been threatened by the UTLA that if they do not vote in favor of the agreement, they will still have to return to schools under conditions imposed entirely by the district. In other words, the choices being placed before Los Angeles teachers, students and parents are either a) return to school or b) return to school.

This is despite the fact that about half of LAUSD parents do not want their children returning to in-person learning, according to parent survey results published Monday by the *Los Angeles Times*. In most of the impoverished areas of the district covered by the survey, where infection rates have been much higher, a majority of parents opposed any in-person return and promised to keep their children learning remotely to the greatest extent possible.

On Monday, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health released its school reopening protocol, stating that schools cannot be reopened if the county returns to the “purple tier” of elevated coronavirus infection rates. It also makes clear, however, that any schools that already reopened prior to case rates trending upward can remain open regardless of the elevated transmission levels. The UTLA and LAUSD eagerly seized upon this proviso, timing the announcement of their deal on the exact day that LA County moved into the “red tier.”

California school districts are also rushing to reopen in hopes of obtaining allotments of \$2.1 billion in funding approved by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom. Under the funding provisions, districts that open on or before April 1 will receive 100 percent of their allotted funding amounts, while those opening after April 1 will lose 1 percent of their funding for each day they fail to open thereafter.

The OEA and OUSD also hope to bribe Oakland teachers into voting in favor of their miserable agreement, promising a \$200-a-week stipend for those teachers who volunteer to come back to campus on March 25. The agreement also includes a one-time \$2,000 stipend for all teachers who come back on April 14.

The latest agreements also follow announcements by the Biden administration promising to quickly end remote learning and thus reopen the economy more broadly. Upon assuming office, Biden announced that one of his key domestic policy goals would be

reopen the majority of all schools across the US by the end of April. The unions, in complete agreement with the political imperatives of the Democrats, are now full partners in this reopening drive despite their initial professions of “resistance.”

Only two weeks ago, the UTLA held a sham vote of its members in which 91 percent of the membership agreed to organize resistance to school reopening if three conditions were not met: vaccines for all teachers, a fall in county infection rates into the “red tier” along with social distancing, and personal protective equipment and regular sanitizing on campuses.

However, the state and the county had already set aside enough vaccines for LAUSD teachers, claiming that they were “essential workers” before the deal was even announced. The state then loosened the criteria for red tier status, making the red tier primarily dependent on reaching a 2-million-person vaccination threshold rather than on infection rates. This was followed by the announcement that LA County had entered the red tier, using the hastily revised metrics the very same day the tentative agreement was announced between the UTLA and LAUSD.

Not only was the red tier classification made dependent on vaccinations, but the infection rate threshold was also changed to accommodate reopening schools and businesses. The previous threshold of fewer than 7 cases per 100,000 was changed to 10 cases per 100,000. The administration of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti seized upon the new guidelines to open restaurants, movie theaters and gyms for in-person business on Monday morning.

The fact that teachers participated in the UTLA’s earlier vote did not imply agreement with the conditions laid out by the union. In fact, many were expressing a desire to keep schools closed entirely, knowing full well that the latest relative decline in COVID-19 cases did not at all represent “safe” conditions as the union claimed.

One teacher wrote on the UTLA’s Facebook page after the tentative agreement was announced, “Say it: this is about money and testing. Not about protecting members.”

Another wrote, “We really need to kill this [agreement], UTLA and LAUSD only want Newsom’s bribe \$\$.”

The latest agreements in Los Angeles, Oakland and across the West Coast indicate that if teachers and workers are to stop the homicidal drive to reopen schools, they must organize themselves independently. The unions are pro-capitalist and are willing partners of the Democrats. They cannot be reformed to meet the interests of, or even to physically protect their own members and the students they serve. We encourage educators, parents, students and all workers to attend the next meeting hosted by the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees this Saturday at 2 p.m. PDT to take this struggle forward. Register today and invite your co-workers and friends to attend!



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