Educators in Oakland and across US determined to close schools and contain the pandemic

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17 March 2021

We urge all educators, students, parents and workers who support the fight against the reopening of schools and dangerous conditions to attend the meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees this Saturday, *March 20 at 2:00 p.m. PDT.*

Across the United States, there are growing signs of opposition among educators, parents and students to the reckless moves by the Biden administration, local and state Democrats, and the teachers unions to quickly reopen schools everywhere. At present, this is expressed most sharply on the West Coast, the last region in the country where learning largely remains remote and officials are aggressively pushing to reopen schools in the coming weeks. Facebook groups for educators and parents throughout the region have become highly active, with many posts receiving dozens or hundreds of comments opposed to the reopening of schools.

A major development took place in California Tuesday at a union meeting of the Oakland Education Association (OEA), in which 49 percent of site representatives defied the union's executive board and voted to oppose the tentative agreement (TA) the OEA leadership had struck with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), while only 45 percent voted in favor.

The building reps are generally more conservative than the rank-and-file membership and it appears likely that the full membership will reject the deal, which is being voted on through Sunday. A comparable vote on February 8 by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) House of Delegates resulted in 85 percent of the delegates voting to endorse the deal to reopen schools, which was then used to browbeat teachers into accepting this abject betrayal.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received reports from Oakland teachers that they and all of their coworkers at individual schools intend to vote down the agreement. If rejected, this would be the first school reopening plan defeated by rank-and-file teachers since Biden's inauguration, and could spur a broader offensive by educators and workers throughout the US who strive to contain the pandemic while the population is vaccinated.

Harley, a high school social science teacher in Oakland and member of the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, commented, "This TA is a devastating threat to student learning and community health. It misleads the public into thinking that schools are safe. It asks us to entrust the health of our students and their families to a district that never bothered to protect their health before the pandemic. It expects teachers to completely reinvent their pedagogy and curriculum to fit a schedule that has not even been bargained. OEA members should unequivocally reject this tentative agreement."

The OEA announced their deal with OUSD on Sunday, less than a week after the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) reached a similar deal with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which LA teachers are voting on until this Sunday. There is also enormous opposition in LA and growing support for a working-class offensive against this policy.

John, a middle school teacher in LAUSD with over 30 years' experience, told the WSWS, "My personal view, which is echoed by a number of teachers at my school, is that the TA for the secondary schools is poorly designed, idiotic and insulting." He added, "The driving force behind this is NOT the students or a better educational experience for them, it can only be the LAUSD getting money from the state!"

Both the OEA and UTLA, which posture as "radical" unions and cloak their betrayals by utilizing identity politics, are following in the footsteps of the pseudo-left CTU, which enforced a similar deadly deal last month.

In the aftermath of the CTU's betrayal, many educators felt beaten back and discouraged. In response, the ruling elites went on the offensive and ramped up their campaign, reaching agreements with local teachers unions to fully or partially reopen schools in Philadelphia, Detroit, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Las Vegas, Memphis, Nashville and other major Democrat-led cities. Emergency decrees were issued to force statewide school reopenings across Arizona, Oregon, and Washington.

Enormous pressure is being brought to bear to reopen schools and keep them open. A major component of the $1.9 trillion "American Recovery Act" is $122 billion for K-12 schools, with funding allocations dependent upon school districts publishing "a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services" within 30 days of receiving funding. Roughly 25 percent of these funds must be reserved for "learning recovery," including summer school and extended-day programs.

With over 1,200 people continuing to die from COVID-19 each day in the US, as the global seven-day average of daily new cases once again reaches 500,000, and as more infectious and lethal variants of the coronavirus spread throughout the world, the most

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trusted epidemiologists such as Dr. Michael Osterholm have warned that school reopenings will facilitate a surge in infections and deaths.

Despite these warnings, the corporate media and political establishment have deepened their propaganda campaign, continuing to present schools as miraculously safe from the spread of COVID-19.

On Wednesday evening, NBC News issued its latest "Life After Lockdown" segment, which seeks to inure the population to the premature lifting of public health measures meant to contain the pandemic. After praising the reopening of Los Angeles schools, host Lester Holt interviewed Education Secretary Miguel Cardona.

Cardona stated, "When schools had to close [last year], it wasn't because of COVID spread within the schools, it was because we had to quarantine educators." Without explaining this absurd statement and ignoring a study that estimated these school closures saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day period, Cardona quickly added that today, "It's not only about opening schools, it's really about making sure they stay open."

Cardona stressed, "My focus really right now is getting as many schools open, K-8 schools, Pre-K-8 schools, in the first 100 days, but also trying to get those high schools open so that we can get all students back in safely, engaging with their friends and learning in the classroom where they learn best."

Efforts are also underway at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to further manipulate science in the interests of big business, this time with the aim of reducing the social distancing recommendation in schools from six feet to three feet.

In damning testimony before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce's oversight and investigations subcommittee on Wednesday, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky stated, "As soon as our guidance came out, it became very clear that 6 feet was among the things that was keeping schools closed, and *in that context science evolves* " (emphasis added).

Walensky noted, "There has been one study that was published late last week that demonstrated in Massachusetts where there is generally 100 percent mask-wearing that 3 feet was actually safe." She added, "We are looking to update our guidance… I am entirely with you as that we need to get our children back [to school]."

The study Walensky referred to was published March 10 in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* and is clearly politically motivated and unscientific. One of the study's authors is economist Emily Oster, who has no background in epidemiology, and is best known as one of the foremost advocates of school reopenings. Last October, Oster wrote the widely criticized article, "Schools Aren't Super-Spreaders," which the bourgeois media, as well as then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the CDC cited to justify school reopenings throughout the US.

The study itself notes that within the Massachusetts school districts they observed, "4,226 cases were reported in students and 2,382 in school staff." Brushing this aside, the study happily concludes that "relaxing distancing requirements would likely have the impact of increasing the number of students who are able to benefit from additional in-person learning."

The campaign to reopen schools has nothing to do with educating students or relieving the mental health crisis, both of which the capitalist elite and their political lackeys exacerbated for decades before the pandemic through austerity, unending war and the destruction of all social services. Rather, the primary motive for the rush to open schools is to be able to compel parents back to unsafe workplaces to produce corporate profits.

Educators are becoming increasingly aware of this basic class reality, and there is growing disillusionment with the Democratic Party and the teachers unions that have ruthlessly pursued these policies. Many recognize the need to organize independently to fight for their interests and are joining the expanding network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees that have been built during the pandemic.

In Oregon, there is enormous opposition to Democratic Governor Kate Brown's mandate that all schools must reopen by April 12. Shortly after this announcement, the Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was launched this week.

Julisa, a bilingual educator and member of the committee, stated, "Rank and File committees are especially important to participate in as they work to bring together all workers to oppose the dangerous reopening to school buildings. Schools have proven to be the lifeline of this country, yet students and school staff, along with all other front-line workers, are being treated as sacrificial lambs so that the billionaires can get wealthier and the leaders that serve them get pats on their backs."

Kathleen, a teacher in one of Oregon's largest districts and a member of the committee, said, "I believe that our schools are not going to be able to keep our students safe. Ventilation systems are antiquated. Our schools think that opening a window is good enough, but that doesn't account for allergies, weather, distractions, or safety. Our kids are not vaccinated and are able to transfer infection to their families or to the friends. Our teachers are being forced back into classrooms with state and political pressures that have everything to do with the economy but nothing to do with health and safety of our staff and communities."

In the face of the unrelenting ruling class campaign to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces, educators and all workers must wage a determined struggle to build their own, independent rank-and-file committees in every school district and industry, to fight for their lives and social rights. These committees are necessary to ensure safety, break through the propaganda of the ruling elites, advance a scientific program to contain the pandemic and to take the actions necessary to close schools.

We urge all educators, parents, students and workers to sign up today to become involved with these committees, and build for this Saturday's meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees as widely as possible!

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