LA and Oakland teachers: Vote “No” on the deadly deals to reopen schools!

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

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees call for Los Angeles and Oakland teachers to vote “no” on their unions’ sellout agreements and refuse to return to classrooms until conditions are completely safe. The efforts of the politicians and teachers unions across the West Coast to return students and staff to schools under deadly conditions must be resisted in order to save lives.

We reject the governmental attempts to classify teachers as “essential workers” in the midst of the deadly coronavirus pandemic in order to push them back into unsafe classrooms. Despite the recent decline in case numbers with a small but slowly increasing minority of the population having been vaccinated, coronavirus infections and deaths are poised to increase. More infectious variants of the virus are now circulating with state and local governments instituting drastic rollbacks of lockdown measures that will guarantee a renewed explosion of infections and deaths.

The decline in cases has already stalled across the US, with some regions in the country, especially the Northeast, now seeing renewed increases. A decisive factor in community spread has been the reopening of schools. In Illinois, where the Chicago Teachers Union worked with the district to reopen schools in the nation’s third largest district, school sites are now the number one source of coronavirus transmission. Similarly, schools are now the number one source of coronavirus cases in the state of Michigan as well.

The overwhelming preponderance of scientific evidence shows that keeping schools closed and learning remote is one of the most effective measures that can be taken to stop the spread of COVID-19. A study published in *Nature* in late 2020 found that “school closures in the United States have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent.”

The false classification of teachers as essential workers and the attendant school reopenings has perhaps had its most devastating impact in Brazil, which is now threatened with a total collapse of its healthcare system. The explosion of cases in that country is decisively linked to school reopenings that took place only one month ago, already claiming the lives of over 20 educators.

In São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, 66,000 people have died of COVID-19, teachers have been forced to go on strike, not for better wages and benefits, but for their very lives. While the São Paulo teachers union, SINPEEM, and the state teachers union, APEOESP, work assiduously to shut down the “strike for our lives” by the teachers, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees fully support the struggle of São Paulo teachers and call for broadening the struggle across Brazil, the United States and throughout the Americas.

Educators across the West Coast of the US are in a fight for their lives as more districts attempt to force open schools in the coming weeks. In California, school districts and teachers unions seized upon the reclassification of counties into the still deadly “red tier” of coronavirus infections to quickly reopen schools. Such plans are now well underway in San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, Oakland, Las Vegas, Oregon and Washington states and across the entirety of the state of California.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has played a critical role in legitimizing this deadly policy, and on Friday utilized faulty science to issue guidelines that state three feet of distance between students is safe. This followed previous politically-motivated guidance by the CDC last month that schools were safe to open “at any level of community transmission.”

School reopenings in San Diego, set to begin on April 12, reduce the allowable distance from six feet to five feet among students. In Las Vegas schools, the CDC’s three-foot distancing mandate is already in place. Far from opposing the deadly resumption of in-person learning, the Clark County Education Association celebrated it, wishing all educators “a great first day back with students in the building.”

Under pressure from the Biden administration, districts and unions along the West Coast have been working overtime to roll out sham tentative agreements (TAs) and

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memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to reopen schools, with deadly implications for educators, students and their families. Teachers in both Los Angeles and Oakland are voting this weekend on TAs to return to school. Both the Oakland Educators Association (OEA) and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) reached agreements behind closed doors with their districts and are fraudulently claiming that it is now safe to return to schools.

The UTLA released a promotional video in advance of the LA vote, claiming that their agreement represented the "gold standard" for a school reopening plan, and that while other teachers unions and districts such as in New York and Chicago were pressured into returning to school too soon, the UTLA "held the line" until it was safe to return.

These are obscene lies. A return to school in LA under present conditions is no safer than it was when the CTU and the UFT in New York reached their rotten agreements earlier this year. The "gold standard" is in fact to not return to school at all until the pandemic is genuinely brought under control.

The OEA, UTLA and all the teachers unions are consciously utilizing the temporary lull in coronavirus infections to quickly reopen schools and present teachers and students with a *fait accompli* once cases rise again.

This tactic has been aided and abetted by the hasty revision of coronavirus infection rate metrics in the state of California to push through the reopenings, along with the announcement of governor Gavin Newsom that more than $2 billion in funds would be allocated to those schools that quickly open their doors to students in April. The state of California revised the threshold for red tier coronavirus infection classification from 7 cases per 100,000 to 10 cases per 100,000. It also allowed counties to immediately enter red tier status after a statewide 2-million-person vaccination threshold was reached.

The only fight the unions have been engaged in is the fight to reopen schools, isolating educators by district and silencing teacher opposition. Fearing that teachers will begin organizing mass opposition to this homicidal policy, the UTLA and OEA have resorted to bribery and threats. The OEA agreement provides a one-time $2,000 stipend to teachers who return back to school on time, while the UTLA is claiming that should teachers vote down its agreement, they will have no choice but to accept the district's terms for reopening, ignoring the fact that the UTLA simply agreed to the district's terms for reopening in the first place.

The UTLA has told teachers, "A no vote means that we don't have an agreement and that LAUSD would be allowed the directive to unilaterally reopen physical school sites without our enforceable safety conditions in place."

These intimidation efforts must be opposed! In their struggle against school reopenings, rank-and-file educators in LA and Oakland will find support among educators in numerous other districts across the West Coast, throughout the US and internationally.

There is overwhelming opposition to these deadly policies not only among educators, but also parents and students, the majority of whom rightly fear that putting their children back into classrooms will expose them and their families to COVID-19. A number of petitions are being circulated online among parents and teachers who refuse to return to unsafe classrooms.

Already, significant numbers of parents in schools across the country have adamantly refused to bring their children back into classrooms. Numerous parents across the West Coast will inevitably follow suit if schools are reopened here.

Such resistance, however, will not be successful if left at the individual level. It must find a conscious and coordinated expression guided by a political perspective and program that is completely independent of the Democrats, the Republicans and the trade unions, which have done everything in their power to subordinate the interests of the workers they nominally represent to the interests of profit.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who draws a salary of nearly $500,000 per year, made the union's position quite clear in a recent response to a teacher on the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee who demanded schools remain closed. Weingarten bluntly replied, "We're not going to fight to keep the schools closed."

The reopening disaster can and must be stopped! Through rational and scientific action on the part of the working class, infection rates can be slowed. Every measure must be taken to immediately contain the virus and save as many lives as possible until the vaccine becomes widely available.

We are fighting for the closure of schools and the economic security of all workers while the pandemic is contained. We call on all educators and support staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, nurses, secretaries, classroom aides, janitors, cooks, school psychologists, social workers and workers from all industries, to join our network and build rank-and-file safety committees in your school or workplace. We have outlined our demands in our previous statement here. Fill out the "Join" form at wsws.org/edsafety to get involved today!

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