

School reopening deals approved in Los Angeles and Oakland as unions stifle opposition

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On Sunday, teachers unions in Oakland and Los Angeles announced that their members had voted in favor of tentative agreements to return to in-person learning. These outcomes followed concerted campaigns of threats and intimidation in favor of “yes” votes by both the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA). The vote in Oakland was 1,024 to 790 in favor or 56 percent to 44 percent. The UTLA reported 18,127 voting in favor (89 percent) with 2,286 voting against (11 percent).

Approximately 12,000 UTLA members abstained from voting altogether, meaning that in actuality only slightly more than half of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) teachers and other staff voted in favor of returning. About 78 percent of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) teachers participated in the vote, meaning that less than half of OEA members actually approved the deadly deal to reopen schools.

The reckless campaign to reopen schools in both cities has developed as a conspiracy between the teachers unions, school districts, state politicians, the media and the Biden administration. Above all, the teachers unions stand exposed as pliant tools of the Democratic Party and behind them the financial oligarchy.

Under conditions in which more infectious and lethal variants of COVID-19 are spreading throughout the US and globally, and the population is nowhere near fully vaccinated, this policy will be a total disaster and lead to further infections and deaths throughout the region.

As with the vote last month to reopen Chicago schools which was heavily pushed by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the votes in Los Angeles and Oakland should in no way be construed as expressions of support for either the UTLA or the OEA. Those who did vote in “favor” were told repeatedly by the unions that they had no choice but to vote for the agreements, that the schools would reopen regardless of the vote, and that the unions would do nothing to oppose this homicidal policy.

As the UTLA told teachers in the lead-up to the vote, “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.” Like any good con artist, the UTLA essentially told teachers, “Heads I win. Tails you lose.”

As the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees stressed in a statement published Saturday calling for a “No” vote, “The only fight the unions have been engaged in is the fight to reopen schools, isolating educators by district and silencing teacher opposition.”

After the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee released a statement on March 1 urging teachers to learn the lessons of the CTU’s betrayal, the UTLA felt compelled to release an unprecedented video in advance of its tentative agreement vote falsely claiming that, unlike the CTU, it had “held the line” until conditions in Los Angeles were safe.

Conditions in LA, however, are in fact nothing of the kind. Less than two months ago, the LA metro region was the worldwide epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. A recent decline in coronavirus cases has already plateaued with the city poised to witness a marked increase in cases once again as not only schools, but restaurants, churches, gyms, salons and movie theaters reopen for in-person attendance. The same conditions exist in communities throughout the state of California, as local and state politicians press to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces statewide.

The school reopening policies will soon lead to new outbreaks and infections in both cities and their surrounding regions. Under Oakland’s reopening agreement, in-person instruction for pre-kindergarten through second grade will begin on March 30, which will then expand through fifth grade on April 19, with one additional secondary grade also returning.

Knowing that Oakland teachers were immensely fearful of returning back to classrooms, the tentative agreement sought

to bribe them by offering a \$200 per week stipend to those who return early on March 25 and a one-time stipend of \$2,000 to those who return by April 14.

The Los Angeles agreement returns most elementary school students back to classrooms on April 19, while secondary students will return to school later that month. Elementary school students will be divided into two cohorts, with one cohort on campus in the morning and the other on campus in the afternoon.

In a meeting held with city religious leaders on Sunday, LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner announced that teachers at 50 elementary school sites would actually be returning the week of April 12 as part of a pilot program before the broader reopening. All official statements and press prior to the ratification, both from the union and from the district's side, specifically announced April 19 as the official reopening date for elementary schools and mentioned nothing about a pilot program starting a week earlier.

As far as secondary school students in Los Angeles are concerned, once they return each student will be placed in the same classroom throughout the day conducting classes with their teachers via online Zoom sessions. In other words, instruction throughout the remainder of the school year for those students will not fundamentally differ from what they received while learning remotely.

The key difference, however, is that they will be exposed to coronavirus infection in an in-person learning environment. Despite the claims by the union and district that there will be heightened safety protocols, LAUSD students will now put themselves, their families and their neighborhoods at unnecessary risk of catching the virus and spreading it throughout their communities.

Furthermore, the secondary school arrangements give the lie to claims made by district, government and union officials that the return to school plan was driven by concerns over students falling behind academically.

At Sunday's meeting, Beutner noted a "lifetime of consequences" if students remain out of classrooms for too long. This was followed, however, with the superintendent highlighting the district's "Primary Promise" program, which added reading and math teachers to some classrooms. Beutner claimed that elementary students in the program experienced significant advancements in reading and math scores after the program was initiated last August, that is, when all students were still learning remotely.

The school reopening deal in LAUSD claims that teachers will return to classrooms after receiving both doses of the coronavirus vaccine, but given the rushed timeline and the fact that many teachers have yet to receive their first dose, this is highly dubious. The OUSD deal only stipulates that

all teachers receive at least the first dose of the vaccine by April 19, that is, more than three weeks after many teachers have already returned to school.

In both cases, none of the more than 37,000 students in Oakland nor the more than 600,000 in Los Angeles will have received a coronavirus vaccine when they return to classrooms.

Survey results released Monday by the Los Angeles Times found that fewer than 3 in 10 students would immediately return to classrooms once they reopen. Only 28 percent of families indicate they will send their elementary school students back, with 17 percent of middle school families and 10 percent of high school families indicating the same.

These figures expose the falsity of claims by the unions that teachers would be isolated if they resist in-person learning. On the contrary, teachers have mass support among the working class, which face the same brutal conditions and demands that they sacrifice their health and lives for profits.

Educators and students must anticipate that none of the unions' promised safety measures will be in place when schools reopen, as has been the case in Chicago, Philadelphia and throughout the country.

After schools in Michigan and Illinois reopened for in-person learning, school sites in those states became the primary sources of coronavirus transmission in spite of false claims made by the Biden administration and local and regional governments that children don't spread the virus.

The same conditions will exist in Los Angeles, Oakland and across the West Coast as schools start to reopen. Educators, parents, students and all workers must resist this homicidal policy before it's too late. We urge all those who oppose the murderous school reopening drive to help build rank-and-file safety committees in every school district today!



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