

Drive for in-person classes intensifies in the Philippines

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Around the globe, the capitalist class, in country after country, is pushing for the reopening of schools. The aim is to herd parents back into unsafe workplaces, offices, and factories to resume the production of profit, even as the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncontrolled.

To date, Philippine K-12 schools remain closed for in-person classes, one of 27 countries with unopened schools. The capitalist drive to resume production and the generation of profits is global. Big business and the political establishment are ramping up their campaign for the reopening of all schools in the Philippines.

The center of their campaign is the push for the implementation of the Philippine Department of Education's pilot program of reopening 1,000 public schools in areas with low levels of COVID-19 transmission. The objective is to prove that schools can be "safely reopened" with the bare minimum of health protocols, including hand-washing, masks, and physical distancing.

There is, however, no scientific evidence for the "safe reopening" of schools at any level of transmission. Quite the opposite is the case. A Montreal study concluded school transmissions had fuelled community transmissions in the city. In Michigan, following their own "safe reopening", K-12 schools are now the largest source of new COVID-19 outbreaks in the state.

The pilot program is an experiment, with no funds allocated for medical expenses for anyone who becomes infected. There are no funds for masks. There are no funds for the additional teachers who will be needed as physical distancing will require dividing up classes. And despite the fact that most COVID-19 infected children are asymptomatic, no mass testing will be conducted.

The pilot program is opposed by former military and police officers in President Rodrigo Duterte's cabinet

led by ex-Philippine army general and interior department secretary Eduardo Año. The *Philippine Star* quoted Año in November 2020 as stating, "Should there be a spike, would you [addressing legislative proponents] be the one treating (those infected)? Would you be the one shouldering the costs? Second, who will be held accountable?"

Año's reservations do not arise from a concern for the lives and health of workers and the poor. Under the guise of a "war on drugs" and of counter-terrorism, the military and the police of the fascistic Duterte government have overseen the extrajudicial killing of over 30,000 working poor and youth.

There is an immense social anger in the working class and the poor over the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic which has prioritized profits over lives. From January to March last year, it refused to prepare—it did not even purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or testing machines. The subsequent abrupt shutdown, similar to India, of the national capital region and the island of Luzon left millions without funds or sources of income. The government did not conduct mass testing or carry out adequate contact tracing.

Over 12 million people have lost employment due to the pandemic. Government financial support to the poor and unemployed has been limited to a one-time cash handout of less than \$US200, amounting in total to \$US4 billion. The polling firm Social Weather Station reports that four million families, 16 percent of all families in the country, have gone hungry at least once in the past three months.

By contrast, massive funds were channelled to the financial elites amounting to over \$US18 billion, including an automatic annual appropriation of nearly \$9 billion for interest payments on government debt

and \$9 billion for quantitative easing. A tax cut for businesses totalling nearly \$21 billion over the next ten years is awaiting Duterte's signature. Meanwhile, the government kept workers in Business Processing Outsourcing, mining, construction and banking at work throughout the pandemic, earning business billions more.

In recent months, daily new cases reported have climbed from 2,050 in January to 8,000 last week. Reported active cases now total 80,000. Over 656,056 people have now been infected, a figure that is second only to Indonesia in Southeast Asia. More concerning still, the positivity rate—the proportion of tests returning a positive result—has climbed to 14.6 percent, indicating that transmission is faster than has been tracked.

Last month, undoubtedly deeply concerned about a possible explosion of social anger, Duterte again postponed the launching of the pilot school reopening program to August this year.

The ruling elites were unanimous in their fury. Philippine Business for Education, an education reform advocacy organization comprised of big businesses and private schools, denounced the postponement as “disastrous” for the education system and economy.

The Senate, despite being dominated by Duterte's allies, approved a resolution calling for the immediate implementation of the pilot program. Vice President Leni Robredo, the opposition leader, demanded the resumption of in-person classes.

The establishment media also chimed in, lamenting school closures as diminishing the value of Filipino workers, who would lose out in the international job market, a calamity declared more dire than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Playing the same class role as its union counterparts around the world, Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), the public schoolteachers' union politically aligned with the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), also demanded the “safe” reopening of all schools. It declared the government's “blended learning” program, a fusion of remote learning and delivery of printed materials for those without internet access and interactive facilities, to be a failure.

Undoubtedly, decades of underfunding education and public infrastructure and the capitalist impoverishment of the working class has produced a situation in which millions of youth have limited or no access to

education. The solution to this crisis, however, is the confiscation of the wealth of the super-rich to fund the construction of cell sites, the provision of free internet access and interactive facilities, and the hiring of more teachers who will be paid better wages and provided quality educational materials.

Using the poverty of millions as a justification, ACT is instead supporting the homicidal drive of the ruling class to send over 27 million children along with hundreds of thousands of teachers and staff back to unsafe schools.

Duterte's delay to school reopening is a manoeuvre to buy time.

An Anti-Terror law that strips due process and democratic rights from those accused of “terroristic acts” has already been approved. Challenges to its constitutionality filed at the Supreme Court are almost certain to be dismissed as all but two of the justices are Duterte's appointees.

A government red-tagging campaign is being escalated against critics of the Duterte administration, including a beauty pageant winner, a court judge, and actors, all of whom have been publicly labelled as “communist terrorists” or sympathizers.

Two weekends ago, security forces killed nine activists of legal non-government organizations while ostensibly serving search warrants for weapons, in simultaneous raids that became known as “Bloody Sunday.”

Preparations for an authoritarian regime are far advanced. They are being readied for a confrontation with the working class who will not allow themselves and their loved ones to suffer and die in unsafe schools and workplaces.



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