“There is no transparency with UTLA”

Teachers in Los Angeles speak out as catastrophic school reopenings loom

Dan Conway
26 March 2021

At 2:00 p.m. PDT this Saturday, March 27, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees will meet to review the lessons of the teachers unions’ betrayals in LA and Oakland, discuss the situation throughout the region, and chart a fighting strategy for workers to save lives. Register *and invite your co-workers and friends!*

Numerous educators, parents and community members have taken to social media to denounce aspects of the agreement between the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) to reopen the second largest school district in the US. Under the terms of the agreement, which the union informed teachers they had no choice but to pass, elementary schools will begin returning to in-person learning on April 12, while secondary school students are scheduled to return later that month.

The UTLA referred to the agreement as the “gold standard” of union-backed return-to-school plans. Among its promises were two doses of coronavirus vaccine for each teacher before they reenter classrooms. Also in the agreement was a refusal to return to class without a decline in cases countywide from the most dangerous “purple tier” to the slightly less dangerous “red tier.”

It also included provisions related to mandatory coronavirus testing each week, along with temperature screenings, six-foot distancing between students, personal protective equipment and other safety measures.

Despite the union’s posturing, it is becoming increasingly clear that both the union and the district have no intention of even meeting these thoroughly inadequate provisions.

The vaccination provision, for example, was timed, according to the original tentative agreement, to allow teachers the chance to receive both the first and second doses of the vaccine while also allowing them a two-week recovery period after the second dose before returning to classrooms. After teachers were given an initial date for vaccine eligibility, this would have meant a return to school on April 19, the date initially provided in the tentative agreement.

However, on March 21, the same day that the union announced that teachers had voted in favor of the agreement, LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner announced that scores of elementary schools would actually reopen on April 12, a full week earlier, cutting the promised recovery period short. Given recent vaccine shortages throughout Los Angeles County this week alone, it is likely that many teachers will not receive a second dose of the vaccine at all before returning.

As far as the re-categorization of countywide coronavirus cases into the “red tier” is concerned, this was made possible on the basis of the blatant manipulation of both the county and state coronavirus metrics to force through the LA reopening. The same day the tentative agreement was announced on March 9, LA County declared that the region had entered the red tier, based on increasing the classification threshold from seven cases per 100,000 residents to 10 cases per 100,000 residents.

It also claimed that because the state had vaccinated two million people out of its total population of 40 million, it was no longer necessary to stay under the red tier threshold for 14 consecutive days, and the county was then put into the red tier immediately.

A recent UTLA Facebook post addressed concerns among teachers that the county may reenter the purple tier once again as a number of states across the country are experiencing a new wave of coronavirus infections. The UTLA simply stated that reentering the purple tier would result in “resumed negotiations,” presumably of a completely nonbinding character. Knowing full well that LA County allows schools to stay open if infection rates move back into the purple tier, the UTLA made no promises to close schools in the event of a fourth wave of the pandemic.

Having been told there were adequate sanitation measures in place on campuses, teachers returning to schools early this

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week instead found that classroom sinks were deliberately turned off despite the agreement stating that every room with a sink would be stocked with soap, hand sanitizer and paper towels, presumably with running water.

Teachers have also been told that weekly coronavirus testing at each school actually means getting the tests done on their own time. *Ric, a fifth grade LAUSD teacher,* told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "One thing in the TA is that the district is requiring us to do COVID tests, but that's on us, on our own time. I myself can't do that. After work, I need to get home right away because I have an elderly family member I'm taking care of. I can't stop somewhere on the way home and get a COVID test."

Frightened of putting their children and families at risk and understandably distrustful of the safety claims made by the district and the union, the majority of parents do not intend to send their children back to classrooms once schools reopen. The latest district survey of LAUSD households on Thursday found that only 49 percent of elementary, 35 percent of middle school and 25 percent of high school student respondents were planning to return to their classrooms on their designated dates. With non-respondents considered to be choosing remote learning by default, these figures drop to 37, 23 and 15 percent respectively.

The WSWS spoke to several teachers this week about their concerns over the return to school plan, as well as the tactics used by the UTLA on social media to prevent coordinated opposition from emerging. The union has blocked comments on its Facebook page opposing the latest agreement, especially from supporters of the WSWS and the West Coast and Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees. *Kirk, an LAUSD teacher,* told the WSWS, "I am disgusted by the UTLA Facebook group's use of shills and tactics to stifle debate."

Ric commented, "After school we had a staff meeting with the principal that was demoralizing. We were told that only around 20 percent (around 100 out of over 500) of the students were returning, and they would have to sit through three hours of instruction without a break because her director had told her emphatically that there would be no recess.

"There would be two cohorts, an AM and a PM. The issue was that so few students were returning that there would likely be no need for a PM cohort. This put lie to the notion the district was promoting that they were simply responding to a massive amount of parents clamoring for the reopening."

He added, "The UTLA and the district also claimed they needed to reopen because many students were suffering emotionally from the isolation. No survey, that I am aware of, was conducted to determine how many students were indeed suffering academically. Those students could have been offered counseling services instead of forcing all the students and staff to return while COVID is still raging and only in the 'red tier' because the metrics were manipulated for political purposes.

"Another issue is staggered start and end times. The principal claimed that 100 students trying to enter the school at the same time would be too much, and the solution would be to start the older students at 8:30, which means teachers who normally end the day at 2:29 would now be working until 3:40. Miraculously, the union was claiming this only amounted to an extra 30 minutes of work, and it was paid at our hourly rate."

Lisa, an LAUSD elementary school teacher with 24 years, stated, "It's a scary time we are living in and not giving teachers the choice that we are giving everyone else, feels so wrong to me. My child is doing school online for the rest of the year. I lost my sitter because she got another job, and I have no family out here to care for my child when I am forced back. I don't want to use day care centers or strangers to care for my child right now.

"I won't be fully vaccinated yet because I had to wait after getting COVID three months ago. Most of us are just so angry with our union and feel like they didn't fight for us like they should have."

Lisa continued, "I was told at our staff meeting today that even if we couldn't get an appointment for the vaccine or even if we weren't fully vaccinated, we still had to report back to work when we fully reopen campus.

"There is no transparency with UTLA," she said. "They use scare tactics to get people to vote the way they want."

The WSWS and the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee warned repeatedly that the UTLA would betray rank-and-file educators and force through a deadly deal to reopen schools. This committee is now the center of opposition to these policies, and we urge Los Angeles educators, parents and students to join and help build the committee and attend our meeting at 2:00 p.m. PDT this Saturday.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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