

West Coast educators call for unity with striking Columbia University graduate students

West Coast Educators Rank and File Safety Committees
28 March 2021

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees met on Saturday as the death toll hit 550,000 in the US—nearly one-fifth of the global total of 2.7 million deaths. Some 30.2 million people have officially tested positive for the virus in the US, including 3.2 million cases among children, with both figures known to be significant under-counts.

All measures to contain the pandemic have been either haphazard or entirely thrown out the window. In the last few weeks, mask mandates have been lifted in at least six states, including Texas, totaling some 37 million people.

Along the West Coast, major school districts from San Diego, California to Seattle, Washington are set to reopen in the coming weeks. Faced with the reality of the ongoing pandemic, the vast majority of parents and educators oppose these deadly reopening plans and wish to remain remote despite the lies advanced by the politicians, school districts, teachers unions, the media and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that schools are “safe.”

Over the last two weeks, multiple teachers unions throughout the West Coast have conspired with their local school boards, Democratic Party officials in the state and the Biden administration to reopen schools. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), San Diego Education Association (SDEA), Oakland Education Association (OEA), Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) and Seattle Education Association (SEA) have celebrated the recent approvals of tentative agreements (TAs) which mandate that educators physically return to classrooms in the coming weeks.

Nowhere have educators been given the ability to vote to stay remote and save lives. Rather, the unions have followed the same playbook as the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City to push educators and students back into unsafe classrooms.

Since reopening in mid-February, Illinois has reported K-12 schools as the number one source of COVID-19 cases

throughout the state. Also, data from the Michigan Public Health Department shows that between February 20 to March 20 of this year, K-12 schools emerged as the number one source of all outbreaks.

Significant data has emerged from the UK Office for National Statistics, showing that 13 percent of children under 11 years of age and about 15 percent of 12- to 16-year-olds are reporting symptoms of long-haul COVID, in which symptoms persist for months after infection. Such concerning data on long-haul COVID in children and significant outbreaks in schools have not slowed the reopening campaigns in districts and major cities across the country.

The struggle against dangerous conditions in the schools cannot be solved on a single campus or in a single school district. We must unite as educators, students and workers everywhere in a fight for our lives, against the homicidal plans to reopen the economy and further attacks on working conditions. We must expand our struggles toward a general strike to halt the spread of this deadly pandemic.

We have built and are expanding an international network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which are fighting organizations, independent from the trade unions, in order to defend our interests and lives.

We, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, extend our solidarity with the courageous striking graduate student workers at Columbia University (CU) in New York City. We urge the graduate student strikers to join us by building an independent rank-and-file strike committee to unite with other university student workers, K-12 educators and the working class more broadly throughout the US and internationally.

The demands of the striking CU graduate students for improved safety measures, wages and health care, expanded family and child care benefits to combat austerity measures being pursued during the pandemic, is common to educators and school workers everywhere. We too as educators and

workers on the West Coast are struggling against the very same powerful corporate and political forces, led primarily by the Democratic Party, who are seeking to push us back into classrooms so that profits can continue flowing.

The CU graduate student union, the Graduate Workers of Columbia University (GWC), is doing everything possible to isolate and shut down the strike. Recently it has presented a sellout plan to concede on wage demands. The proposed agreement, on which rank-and-file members had not been consulted, would leave student workers with a de facto pay cut in the first year, taking into account inflation. The union has ignored rank-and-file demands and is actively preventing the linking up of the strike at Columbia with graduate student workers at New York University (NYU), who are part of the same amalgamated union and are voting on strike authorization for similar reasons.

The GWC is affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has fought on behalf of management to keep autoworkers on the line during the pandemic, even though COVID-19 has spread like wildfire throughout the plants. A year ago, an international wildcat strike wave by workers shut down the industry from Italy to Detroit, not because the unions waged a struggle for the lives and safety of autoworkers, but because the workers themselves halted production.

After a two-month closure, the UAW forced workers back into the plants and imposed brutal working conditions to make up for production losses. Significantly, Columbia University's Interim Provost Ira Katznelson, part of the billionaire-packed Board of Trustees, is a former political strategist for the UAW.

Just as the union is attempting to isolate and suppress the strike at Columbia University, so have our struggles been isolated and our opposition silenced by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), as well as their state and local affiliates along the West Coast.

It is critical we heed the lessons of our current struggles. The unions present a veneer of democracy, but in reality they are carrying out the dictates of the Democratic Party to reopen the economy, risking not only the lives of workers and their families but also intensifying austerity on the working class.

CU graduate student workers, along with their student, faculty and staff allies must link up and broaden their fight into a united struggle across campuses and universities and beyond! Workers everywhere, throughout the US and internationally, are facing the same problems, as our rights are being viciously attacked.

The struggles faced by workers, intensified by the response of the ruling elite across the globe to the pandemic,

are international in form and content. There is a wider movement of educators internationally—from the graduate students at the University of California, also “represented” by the UAW, who are fighting against rising costs of living and low wages; to the important and brave struggles by Moroccan teachers, who are being brutally suppressed for fighting against the attacks on education and the casualization of their profession; the Brazilian teachers, who in the face of the COVID-19 catastrophe and a collapsing health care system, are engaged in a “strike for their lives”; and the airport ground workers in Germany who are fighting against layoffs and attempts at wage theft through the implementation of a cheap labor platform.

Any serious struggle inevitably brings workers into conflict with the capitalist system and its parties. Fundamentally, we understand that the issues which educators and students face cannot be solved under the capitalist system.

The growing resistance of the working class must be developed into a conscious political struggle for socialism. The response by the ruling elite has been to prioritize profits in the interests of Wall Street over human life. Amid intensified economic, political and social crises, the US billionaires have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion as unemployment claims have maintained unprecedented highs at a four-week average of 736,000 unemployed.

Biden has continued the policies of Trump to reopen schools, universities and businesses as the pandemic continues to spread. Such homicidal policies have fully exposed the interests of the ruling elite as being diametrically opposed to the working class and has produced mass opposition among workers and youth.

We call on graduate workers to join our international network of rank-and-file committees and to arm yourselves with a socialist perspective to address the urgent needs of not only academic workers but of the working class around the world. Reach out to us at wsws.org/edsafety for assistance.



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