

“The union pulled the wool over teachers’ eyes”

Oakland schools set to reopen amid surge in pandemic

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On March 20, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) narrowly passed an agreement reached by the union to force teachers to report for in-person instruction on April 14. The deal dropped many of the longstanding demands for which teachers had fought, including tying a return to school sites to low transmission rates in the county and hardest hit zip codes. Instead, after just a few days of teacher prep, students are expected to show up on April 19 regardless of the state of the pandemic.

In tandem with the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the OEA pushed aggressively for teachers to approve their miserable agreement with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). The vote in Oakland was 1,024 to 790 in favor, or 56 percent to 44 percent. Given that only 78 percent of Oakland teachers participated in the vote, less than half of OEA members actually approved the deadly deal to reopen schools. OUSD has 2,332 teachers, who serve roughly 37,000 students.

This deal recklessly endangers the health of educators, students and families, while also callously disregarding the educational needs of students. In order to contain the pandemic and save lives, Oakland educators must prepare to fight independently of the unions through the development of the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. This committee must be expanded into every school and neighborhood and serve as a democratic fighting organization to resist the reopening efforts driven by the ruling elites.

A new surge of the COVID-19 pandemic has already started across the US, fueled by school reopenings, the loosening of public health measures and the

uncontrolled spread of more infectious and lethal variants. Over the past week, the rate of new infections increased in 34 states, test positivity rates increased in 38 states, and hospitalizations were up in 20 states. Vaccination rates remain far below what is necessary to safely achieve herd immunity.

In Michigan, where K-12 schools have become the top source of new COVID-19 outbreaks, the average daily infection rate is over four times higher than in February. The latest surge has barely registered in California’s statistics, but the rate of new cases has leveled out and begun to climb once again.

In California, the three main variants of concern are all spreading uncontrolled: the B.1.1.7 British variant that is significantly more transmissible, the P.1 Brazilian variant that current vaccines are less effective against and has caused numerous reinfections in patients, and the B.1.351 South African variant. The more the pandemic is allowed to spread, the greater the danger that new variants emerge that are resistant to current vaccines and could potentially turn COVID-19 into a persistent, endemic disease like the flu.

Beyond the health risks, teachers blindsided by the OEA’s betrayal are now scrambling to cobble together plans to radically change their classes over the next two weeks. Underscoring the absurdity of the mad dash to reopen schools, when students return there will only be six weeks left in the school year. As of this writing, the union and the district have not even proposed a schedule, leaving teachers in limbo.

Jeffrey, a special education teacher at an elementary school in East Oakland, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the drive to reopen schools. As a resource service provider, he provides

specialized academic support to students who spend most of their time in the general education classroom setting.

“At the beginning of the year, it took us almost two months until we were able to provide services to our students. It was only in October that we started really seeing the kids and just last week that I felt like I finally was in the groove with good attendance and results from my caseload. I have full groups coming, and it works, but they’re going to throw it all out for something completely new and unprepared. My biggest fear is that it will take that long again to set up hybrid instruction.”

Teachers have so far seen only rough proposals for schedules that raise more questions than they answer. Instead of fully remote learning, where teachers have built small reading groups with differentiated instruction, the district and union have been toying with hybrid instruction, in which students who opt-in are split into two cohorts that receive four hours of in-person instruction a week.

In the ordinary functioning of an elementary school, teachers rely on resources and techniques to help students—especially those who have experienced trauma—to emotionally regulate themselves throughout the school day. Common measures to help an upset student, such as letting them cool down in a neighboring classroom, are out of the question in a pandemic.

Particularly at the elementary school level, students who become upset might run out of a classroom (“elope”) and cannot be kept effectively in cohorts. Moreover, young students are not capable of doing academic work for hours straight but need breaks like recess where it would be impossible to maintain social distancing and other health measures. These basic issues, as well as others, including what curriculum teachers will use, are left up in the air under the union’s agreement.

Jeffrey commented, “Honestly, think what teaching under these conditions is going to be like. This might be even more traumatic for students than being remote. Now we’ll have to police these kids over wearing masks, not sharing materials or touching, setting up routines. We will have to stay socially distanced, and students won’t be able to read facial expressions and social cues through the masks. It will be like teaching

in a hospital clean room.”

Commenting on the undemocratic manner in which the agreement was reached between the OEA leadership and OUSD, Jeffrey stated, “I honestly wonder how the TA got passed. I can’t help but feel that the union pulled the wool over teachers’ eyes. The agreement begins by talking about a voluntary return to campus on March 30. It’s only 10 pages in that they even mention that all teachers, regardless of whether they have in-person students to teach, have to come back in person on April 14.

“Also, offering a \$2,000 bonus for us to come back makes me feel dirty. It’s creepy. I want to see my students and teach them if it’s safe. Throwing money at us just feels like they’re playing on desperation. I’ve spoken to school employees in Oakland who are homeless because of the high rents. They’d have a hard time walking away from that bonus.

“Really it feels like the union has already laid down. The pandemic is not over even though the government wants us to act like it is. I went to the West Coast Rank-and-File meeting last Saturday because it’s outside the district’s and the union’s thinking on this. We can’t just stop because the union does, especially when they aren’t fighting for us.”

In the coming weeks before schools reopen, Oakland educators must expand the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee into every school and neighborhood in order to mount a resistance to this reopening drive. Only through the unification of educators, parents, students and the broader working class can the homicidal policies of the ruling elites and both big business parties be stopped. We urge all those who support this fight to join and help build this committee today!



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