

“The unions have actually worked against our interests!”

Educators expose the teachers unions’ role in facilitating the deadly reopening of US schools

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20 April 2021

This is part four of a multipart series of articles featuring interviews with US educators. Read part one here, part two here, and part three here. We encourage all educators, parents and students to share your stories and describe conditions in your district with educators@wsws.org.

The reopening of schools has been one of the top domestic priorities of the Biden administration and the American ruling class. Three months into Biden’s presidency, more than 90 percent of K-12 schools are now open to some form of in-person instruction. According to Burbio.com, 62.4 percent of K-12 students are now attending “traditional” in-person class every day, while 28.2 percent of K-12 students now attend “hybrid” schools that combine in-person and remote learning.

The deadly reopening of schools has been aided and abetted by the teachers unions at every level, whose fundamental interests lie with the Democratic Party and the financial elite. This has been spearheaded by the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), and implemented by the local unions across the US, from the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in Chicago, Illinois, to the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) in Los Angeles, California. All of the unions have promoted the lie that schools can be reopened “safely” amid the deepening pandemic and have actively suppressed genuine opposition among rank-and-file teachers to unsafe and deadly working conditions.

To further accelerate the reopening of schools, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has manipulated science to fit as many kids into classrooms as possible by allowing for social distancing to change from the previously dangerous six feet to three feet. AFT president Randi Weingarten endorsed the CDC’s change in social distance guidelines in schools, generating an outcry from teachers on social media. Despite their false claims to represent the interests of teachers, the unions have made abundantly clear that they will not fight to keep schools closed.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers across the US on their experiences with the unions pushing teachers and students back into unsafe classrooms over the past year.

A teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, noted the betrayals of the unions throughout the US saying, “I think Randi Weingarten has shown us that we can’t trust our unions and that they’re just

another extension of the capitalists. I don’t know what else it could be because they’re certainly not here for their members. I think they showed us that in Chicago. I think we’ve all been duped. We’re paying an exorbitant amount of money, and for what? I followed the WSWs coverage of the Chicago teachers, and I think you are right that we have to go back to grass roots and rebuild because our union isn’t what it was 100 years ago.”

Following a mandate by Democratic Governor Ralph Northam, schools throughout Virginia reopened starting last month. Norfolk Public Schools (NPS) reopened elementary schools on March 15, followed by middle schools on April 12, while high schools are set to reopen April 26.

As the teacher in Virginia noted, the betrayal by the CTU in Chicago laid the groundwork for districts and unions to reopen every other major school district throughout the US where students had been learning safely from home. Despite overwhelming opposition from teachers and parents, the CTU accepted the reopening of schools in mid-February.

Since Chicago schools reopened, the city has seen a 17 percent rise in daily new cases and K-12 schools have continued to be the number one source of COVID-19 infections throughout Illinois at 21.5 percent. Despite such damning figures, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) recently reached a deal with the CTU that allowed for high schools to reopen this week.

The WSWs also spoke with teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) on reopening and their experiences with the UTLA, which utilized the same tactics as the CTU to suppress teacher opposition and push through the reopening of schools. Elementary schools began reopening on April 12, with middle and high schools set to open in the next two weeks. All teachers were required to be back in their classrooms on April 12.

Shawn, a special education teacher for 6th-8th graders in LAUSD, said he has been teaching online so far, but his school will be opening up next week. “All of my students are engaged, and they love to discuss issues. It’s one of the best classes that I’ve had in all my years of teaching.”

He also remarked on his opposition to the reopening plans pushed by the union, saying, “I voted NO on every agreement so far. It’s only about politics and money. I’m not going back into that school because it’s going to be chaos and too many protocols. It’s just that there are so many variables, and as teachers, they like

to be organized. They like to know what's coming, and we can't wrap our heads around all this. So it causes a lot of anxiety and stress.

"So I'm not going in, and none of my students are going back. They will remain remote. I've had an FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] on file for four years, so it was very easy for me to get reasonable accommodations, and so is my paraprofessional because she had an FMLA on file for six years."

Brett, a middle school teacher with 17 years in LAUSD, remarked on the CDC change in social distancing guidelines and Weingarten's endorsement, stating, "It's abominable. It's an arbitrary number to manage the spread, but it has no basis in an elimination strategy. It's sound-bite science to manipulate the many. Only socialism can solve the societal ills that a craven, capitalistic political class creates."

A **teacher in Tennessee** also commented on the AFT's role in facilitating the push to reopen schools. She recalled their treacherous role in the 2018-2019 teacher strikes, noting, "It did not take Randi Weingarten standing shoulder to shoulder with Biden calling for all schools to return to in-person instruction during a pandemic for me to lose faith in teachers' unions. Like every educator in America, I watched as teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona went on strike in 2018-19. I also watched as the AFT went behind the backs of the rank-and-file to shut down the strikes against the wishes of the teachers."

She added, "My own NEA local affiliate stood by and said nothing last summer as teachers were told we would be returning to classrooms like normal. Aside from receiving a very nice tote bag from the union, teachers were forced to scramble on our own to make sense of the betrayal from our leaders as we went back into classrooms armed with our wits and common sense to guide us in classrooms full of students during a deadly pandemic."

A **teacher in Volusia County, Florida**, stated, "Even if you wanted to reopen schools, it would be more effective to shut down schools for a bit and then once cases dropped significantly to maybe start reopening schools in a safe way. This just shows where the district and union's priorities are if they're not even willing to shut down schools for a limited amount of time. The WSWS has explicitly said that the reasons why schools are reopening are so parents can work. The unions were always trying to reopen schools as quickly as possible."

"I have a friend who works at a public school in Miami-Dade county and when I asked how the unions are reacting to the crisis, she'd say they aren't doing anything and would even threaten teachers, creating a really hostile environment. She was also saying the union was applauding going fully in-person for the school she was in, even though most teachers were against it. This was shortly after Biden was elected into office. She also said that people are constantly having to quarantine in her school and there are cases that are reported often while quarantining teachers and students. This is a regular thing, which is insane."

Under Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida's K-12 schools have been open since last summer. The majority of COVID-19 restrictions have also been lifted throughout the state, resulting in a recent alarming surge in cases.

Michael Hull, a former history teacher in Texas and founder of

the Facebook Group "Teachers Against Dying" said, "What other time in history did teachers need a union to fight for them more than now? Yet, they have not only been ineffectual, but have actually worked against our interests!"

"Weingarten, a wealthy Democratic National Committee chairperson and superdelegate, is a bona fide oligarch who wants the schools open for the same reason as any other oligarch. Namely, to support the profits of the wealthy and protect a few handsome stock portfolios. The average worker being 'represented' by someone of this socioeconomic status is a blatant conflict of interests.

"Resistance has come from local and rank-and-file members, but the major disconnect between local chapters and the national bureaucrats has become glaringly apparent. That is the problem, and why we're seeing this bizarre narrative about 'union resistance' from right-wing media, even as the union bosses struggle alongside the elite against the workers. In the final analysis, the national union administration represents a controlled opposition, fully grafted into the establishment wing of the Democratic Party, and so it only makes sense for the rank-and-file to mount resistance independently."

During a recent town hall event hosted by the Facebook group Badass Teachers Association (BATs) and featuring Randi Weingarten, Hull spoke directly to Weingarten on the major dangers associated with reopening schools. Once Hull began raising the class interests underlying the drive to reopen schools, Weingarten interrupted to say, "We're not going to fight to keep the schools closed."

Hull also recently wrote a statement opposing Weingarten's endorsement of the CDC's three-foot spacing recommendation and support for reopening schools.

Kuheha, a public school teacher in Hawaii, commented, "The unions are complicit because the leadership is connected to the powerful and wealthy. Nothing is perfect, and there will always be corruption unless we act differently to limit that corruption. Having said that, I believe in independent rank-and-file committees and rank-and-file ownership of unions that truly serve the interests of workers—safe and decent working conditions."

To be continued



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