

One month after schools began to reopen

Los Angeles teacher describes unsafe and intolerable working conditions

Hong Jian
7 May 2021

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be meeting at 2pm PDT this Saturday, May 8. Register to attend and invite your coworkers, family and friends !

Only one month after students and teachers began returning for in-person learning to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and only a week since all schools have reopened, it is already abundantly clear that the conditions educators face have nothing in common with those promised by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) when it pressured teachers to accept the return to school tentative agreement (TA) it reached with the district in March. LAUSD educators face not only unsafe conditions, but longer hours, increased workloads, requirements to get COVID-19 tests on their own time and added duties that they did not previously have to perform.

The UTLA claimed that if the membership voted no on the TA, under state law LAUSD would still be able to reopen but would not be bound by the guidelines in the agreement and the union would be powerless to enforce any of the safety measures it had negotiated.

Referring to the agreement as the “gold standard” of return-to-school agreements, the union claimed that in-person teaching would only take place in rooms with HVAC systems with a MERV 13 rating or better, where fans would run for 24 hours a day. They said that mandatory coronavirus testing would be provided for students, along with hand sanitizer in every room. They promised full vaccinations for all teachers, adequate PPE, and said that teachers, staff and students would stay six feet apart from one another throughout the day.

Despite the union and the district’s promises, the majority of LAUSD students, many of whom live in impoverished multigenerational households, decided not to return to classrooms. According to the latest update of the *Los Angeles Times* school reopening tracker released Wednesday, only 36 percent of students had returned to classrooms a week after all K-12 schools were opened for in-person learning. The number is not expected to improve with the school year nearly over.

A major contributing factor behind this high rate of absenteeism—which parallels similar trends in Chicago, Oakland, New York City and other major urban school districts—has been the thoroughly inadequate safety measures in place on campuses, which largely fall short of the UTLA/LAUSD reopening

agreement.

Teachers are now simultaneously teaching in-person and virtually in their classrooms. They have to sanitize and clean constantly, as well as attempt to enforce social distancing guidelines between students.

Some schools have even added nursing duties to already overburdened teachers’ workloads. One teacher recently commented on social media, “A box of nurse supplies was dropped off in my class. I teach kindergarten and to think if a child has a bloody [nose] I now have to take care of it and only call the office if it last longer than 15 minutes. What am I to do with the rest of the students?”

An LAUSD teacher who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* commented, “I could go on and on about the absurdity of returning to a class with a non-functioning AC/fan which took three days to repair in spite of the superintendent bragging about how prepared to reopen they were. Students aren’t social distancing because asking kids to socially distance is akin to asking them to not be kids. And classrooms not being swept the entire week in spite of the superintendent’s brag that classrooms would be cleaned floor to ceiling.”

Like similar agreements reached in other cities across the US, the vague and general nature of the agreement’s wording gives LAUSD ample room for maneuvering within the guidelines. Moreover, the fact that the UTLA does not even bother to enforce the agreement renders it worthless. The union has washed its hands of all responsibility for their endangerment of teachers and students.

The LAUSD teacher we interviewed continued, “One of my former students keeps in touch with me. He’s now attending Gage Middle School several blocks away. He just told me that a student was found to be infected with COVID. It hasn’t been on the media. In the TA, I think there was something about a COVID dashboard, but I’m not sure. But there were so many things in the TA that were intentionally vague.

“Students’ instructional time has been cut from at least four hours of instruction to a scant two for those who returned to the classroom, and over half the students stayed online, exposing the union’s lie that they were merely responding to pressure from parents demanding a reopening. In my case, only seven out of 27 students returned to the classroom.”

While both LAUSD and the UTLA claimed that parents were demanding that schools be reopened, they were unable to perpetuate that lie in regard to the lengthening of the school year. The school board and the unions, especially the SEIU Local 1000 representing classified staff, have joined hands to lobby for the lengthening of the school year. However, in the face of enormous opposition from rank-and-file educators, parents and students, in a unanimous vote on May 3 the school board finally shelved a 6-10 day extension of the school year.

Teachers' and parents' opposition to the school year extension could be seen in a number of threads on social media. One teacher said, "So very disappointed with UTLA's handling of the 10-day extension. The membership has spoken: No extension. Then why ask us to rate our preferences as far as how many days to add? We already told UTLA: NO extension!"

Another commented, "No extra days. I don't know how I'm going to make it thru the next 7 weeks."

Another teacher emphasized the overwork they have all already faced, asking pointedly, "Can teachers get a break? We're tired and you're asking us if we want more work? It's been the hardest year+ and you're really asking if we want a shorter summer and shorter winter break?"

As of May 7, California has fully vaccinated only 33.8 percent of its population, with 3.75 million cases and 62,174 deaths. In Los Angeles County alone, there have been over 1.23 million cases and 23,977 deaths. With daily new cases gradually declining but the pandemic nowhere near contained, the Los Angeles County Department of Health (LACDH) issued a press release this week stating that Los Angeles has "met the threshold for the least restrictive yellow tier in the state's Blueprint for a Safer Economy."

By moving into this lowest tier of infections, LA County will completely reopen nonessential workplaces, including allowing bars' indoor capacity to be at 25 percent, while also increasing capacity at "amusement parks and fairs, gyms and fitness centers, yoga studios, private events, bars, hotels and short-term lodging rentals, private gatherings, breweries, indoor playgrounds, restaurants, cardrooms and racetracks, indoor and outdoor live events and performances, wineries and tasting rooms, family entertainment centers, and museums, zoos, and aquariums." The new guidelines follow by less than a week another loosening of restrictions on indoor arcades and playgrounds.

Increasing capacity at these venues, many of which are tourist destinations, such as Disneyland, just as other states are reopening their economies, reducing social distancing and other mitigation measures, constitutes a social crime. This is being carried out by both big business parties, the unions and their hangers-on in the pseudo-left in their drive to implement the unscientific policy of herd immunity based on letting the virus spread uncontrolled through the population.

In fact, only a few days after reopening arcades and indoor playgrounds, and one day before announcing increased capacity at large venues, the LACDH issued a press release, stating, "In April, as more L.A. County schools have reopened, there has been a slight rise in youth hospitalizations from the recent low point." While demonstrating they are aware that their policies are not

conducive to the health of children, they falsely claim, "Protecting children from infection and complications, especially those not eligible for vaccinations, remains a high priority as we enter the summer months." In reality, schools have been forced open long before any children have been vaccinated, as a growing body of evidence shows that millions could suffer from debilitating "Long COVID" for years to come.

In their press release, LACDH also notes that two child deaths in LA County were attributable to multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), and that 180 children in Los Angeles have been diagnosed with MIS-C thus far. On the same day that the LACDH announced the loosening of restrictions, there were 18 new COVID-19 deaths in LA and 273 new confirmed cases.

It is time that the proper conclusions be drawn. School reopenings have nothing to do with the safety of children or concern for their mental wellbeing. Rather, the openings are predicated on getting parents back into workplaces to generate enough profits to pay for the looting of the economy by a handful of billionaires. The ruling class and its backers in the unions are concerned about their bottom lines and not workers' lives.

The LAUSD teacher who spoke with the WSWs commented, "It's abundantly clear that the unions are absolutely useless and the only way to organize resistance is outside these sellout organizations. That's why I joined a rank-and-file committee organized by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is the only organization I know of that is committed to the safety of workers and students. Join a rank-and-file committee and join the fight to resist the premature reopening of schools and businesses for the express purpose of lining the pockets of the ruling class at the expense of workers."

LAUSD educators, parents and students should make the decision to join and build the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today. Register to attend the upcoming meeting of our committee at 2pm PDT this Saturday, May 8, and invite your coworkers, family and friends!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact