

AFT President Randi Weingarten demands fully in-person learning at all US schools

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On Thursday morning, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten gave a one-hour speech that centered on demanding the full reopening of all US schools this fall and promoting illusions in the Biden administration's federal stimulus programs.

The speech underscored the corporatist character of the trade union bureaucracies, which Biden and the Democrats are integrating ever more closely with the state in order to suppress the class struggle. Weingarten, who sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and nets an executive salary of roughly \$500,000, embodies the upper middle class layer of union bureaucrats that are thoroughly hostile to the interests of the workers they claim to represent.

Weingarten's comments came the same day as the CDC announced new guidelines that urge vaccinated people not to wear masks indoors. The CDC ruling takes place as states throughout the country are eliminating all restrictions to stop the spread of COVID-19 in schools and businesses. "The lifting of the mask mandates will only encourage a complete abandonment of all measures that protect people. Half of the population and nearly all children remain unvaccinated. Hundreds are dying and tens of thousands are still becoming infected every day. This is a dangerous turn of events," one practicing physician told the WSWS.

The lifting of the mask requirement has been seized upon by the corporate media and political establishment to demand the full resumption of in-person learning and advance the lie that the pandemic is essentially over in America, despite the fact that nearly 40,000 people are infected with COVID-19 and roughly 650 die each day in the US, while more infectious and potentially vaccine-resistant variants spread unchecked throughout the world.

Weingarten's script was undoubtedly reviewed by officials at the White House, with whom she has closely coordinated the nationwide school reopening campaign since Biden's inauguration on January 20. Last week, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona stated in an interview with MSNBC, "I expect all schools to be open full time, in-person for all students."

Echoing this theme, Weingarten began her speech with an ultimatum, stating, "There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week." She reiterated this multiple times, saying, "We can and we must reopen schools in the fall for in-person teaching, learning and support. And keep them open. Fully and safely, five days a week." Later, she added, "Given current

circumstances, nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open."

At the very beginning of her speech, Weingarten made clear the central purpose of this campaign, which is to compel parents to return to work in order to maximize the production of profits for the financial oligarchy. She stated bluntly, "Parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work—like the three million mothers who dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic."

Weingarten presented a fairy tale story of the past year, seeking to frame school reopenings as chaotic under the Trump administration and harmonious under Biden, while acknowledging that the unions facilitated the process under both regimes. She said, "The Trump administration politicized safety and undermined science. And as a result, from last April right up to January 19, 2021, we were working to reopen schools in a climate of chaos, fear and misinformation as the pandemic surged in wave after wave. Thankfully, the Biden administration changed course. It is fighting the pandemic with science, truth, transparency and, yes, money."

Carefully omitted from this narrative are the disastrous impacts of school reopenings on educators, parents, students and society as a whole, as well as the mass opposition to the Biden administration's deepening of the school reopening campaign.

Multiple studies have shown that opening schools leads directly to a growth in cases and deaths in the broader community, including a recent study which found that Texas school reopenings last August led to at least 43,000 additional cases and 800 additional deaths statewide in an eight-week period after schools began to reopen. According to *Education Week*, "As of May 10, 2021, at least 937 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19."

Under Trump, the AFT and NEA refused to organize any struggle whatsoever to oppose school reopenings, isolating their 4.7 million members district by district. In late July, the AFT passed a resolution that explicitly allowed only for "local and/or state affiliate safety strikes on a case-by-case basis as a last resort." When wildcat strikes broke out throughout the fall, both unions kept them isolated and offered no support whatsoever. Facing this isolation, over 100,000 educators and parents across the US formed Facebook groups to organize protests, which the AFT and NEA never even acknowledged.

Given the enormous opposition to school reopenings among

teachers, most major Democrat-led school districts were compelled to stay fully remote throughout the fall. Upon Biden's inauguration, the unions worked with the Democrats to reverse this, with the most pitched battle taking place in Chicago, the third-largest district in the US with roughly 340,000 students. Shortly after the betrayal of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Weingarten told the *New York Times* that she was spending upwards of 15 hours each day on the phone with the White House, the CDC and local union officials to coordinate the full reopening of schools.

Under both Trump and Biden, the federal government has criminally refused to track COVID-19 infections and deaths tied to schools. However, the CDC has quietly released estimates that nearly 26.7 million children under 18 have been infected with the virus, more than a third of the total US population in that age group. With recent studies showing that roughly 10-15 percent of all children infected with COVID-19 develop "Long COVID," up to 4 million children may already be affected in the country alone. Undoubtedly, a significant number of these child infections have taken place in reopened schools.

Contrary to Weingarten's presentation, the Biden administration—with the collusion of the AFT, NEA, and their local and state affiliates, as well as the CDC—has continued to distort science in the interests of the corporate elite. Biden himself blatantly lied about the dangers posed to children, telling a second grader on CNN, "Kids don't get ... COVID very often. It's unusual for that to happen."

The rest of Weingarten's speech focused on fostering illusions that the Biden administration will vastly improve public education, saying, "We can seed a renaissance in America's public schools that will change young people's lives and change the course of our country."

She read off an extended list of additional supports for students, educators and school staff that she claimed would be provided through the roughly \$125 billion in K-12 education funding allocated through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). In many respects, this was a supplement to Biden's April 28 State of the Union address, which the *World Socialist Web Site* characterized as "the politics of the golden mean—everything for everyone."

The reality is that the ARPA funding will be spread out over two and a half years, averaging roughly \$50 billion/year or merely \$1,000 per student. Conservative estimates produced by Learning Policy Institute in July 2020 suggested that states will need between \$200 and \$300 billion to stabilize their K-12 education budgets and meet even a portion of the additional costs over just the next year and a half.

Weingarten also injected racial and identity politics into her speech, as part of increasingly aggressive efforts by the teachers unions, the Democrats and the media to conceal the underlying causes of the crisis in the capitalist system. She stated, "racial injustice in particular has been a 'pandemic within the pandemic,'" while calling for the hiring of more "teachers of color." The AFT and NEA are increasingly promoting the use of the *New York Times'* 1619 Project—which has been thoroughly exposed as historical falsification by the WSWS—as history curriculum in schools across the US.

The efforts by Weingarten to sow illusions in the Biden administration and to claim that the pandemic is nearly over will ring hollow to educators, parents and students, who have faced the most horrific year in living memory, during which they have been completely abandoned by the unions.

Recognizing the subservience of the unions and Democrats to the school reopening imperatives of the capitalist class, masses of educators and other workers have become increasingly radicalized over the past year. The most far-sighted and militant have formed networks of rank-and-file committees, wholly independent of the unions and both big business parties, in cities and states across the US and globally, among educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers, transport workers and other sections of the working class.

Michael Hull, a teacher and member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, commented on Weingarten's speech, saying, "Instead of fighting for better remote instruction and payments for working families, she keeps pushing the back-to-work and back-to-school narrative on behalf of Wall Street. There is no way forward for the working class with such frauds at the fore. We must take up the fight independently of organizations like the AFT, which have effectively been grafted into the establishment wing of the Democratic Party to serve as a controlled opposition."

In order to contain the pandemic, all schools and nonessential workplaces must be closed and all workers and families provided with ample financial support. Resources must be expanded for universal testing, contact tracing and isolation of all infected patients. The production and distribution of the vaccine must be vastly scaled up and the profit motive eliminated in order to safely vaccinate the world's population.

To implement this program, it is essential that workers in every industry form rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles across state and national boundaries. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been established for this purpose, and all educators and other workers who wish to fight to save lives should sign up today to build a committee at your school or workplace.



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