

# Louisiana schools set to fully reopen this fall as vaccinations stagnate and businesses reopen

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Louisiana is on track to have a disastrous fall semester as K-12 schools are set to reopen in person with few, if any, physical restrictions in place and a dangerously low vaccination rate.

In line with federal, state and local government policies across the United States, Louisiana has removed what few public health measures were in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. In late May, Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards announced that after the spring semester, masks would no longer be required in schools, leaving the decision to individual school districts. Multiple districts immediately ended their mask requirements.

According to the *Advocate*, Bel Edwards declared that “he’ll continue to extend the state’s public health emergency declaration for as long as the pandemic persists, but only to take advantage of cost-sharing opportunities provided by the federal government.”

Last month, New Orleans Public Schools Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr. told the school board that he wants all students learning in-person this fall and suggested that the pandemic is over. “This evening, I want to be very, very clear, as we come out of this pandemic, that distance learning can no longer be the norm,” Lewis said, adding, “Students are the safest physically and emotionally when they receive their education face-to-face with their teachers and shoulder-to-shoulder with their peers.”

In a move that will cloud the spread of the virus, the Louisiana Department of Health has discontinued releasing data on school infections for the summer, despite thousands of students attending summer school. The most recent data available, from May 24–30, recorded 21 active cases among faculty, staff and volunteers and 104 cases among students, indicating that the virus continues to spread in schools. Between late October and the end of May, the figures total 8,877 staff and 21,250 students infected with COVID-19.

Capacity limits on bars, venues, stadiums and other large gatherings have been removed statewide. Edwards cited the

availability of vaccines as reason to remove such mitigation measures, but, in reality, Louisiana has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country. As of June 24, only 34 percent of the eligible population is fully vaccinated and only 37.7 percent is partially vaccinated, while new vaccinations have stagnated.

At the same time, the decline in cases seen in the state, as in the US as a whole, has also started to flatline. The rolling seven-day average of new cases on June 24 was 312, up from the week prior’s seven-day average of 286. The seven-day average for new deaths has remained between five and six since the beginning of June. With the more infectious and lethal Delta variant now spreading throughout the US, cases and deaths are all but guaranteed to accelerate in the coming weeks.

On June 22, the Louisiana Department of Health was tracking 1,050 outbreaks and 7,046 cases in non-congregate settings, which it defines as “2 or more cases among unrelated individuals that have visited a site within a 14-day time period.” The largest active outbreaks are occurring in close-quartered places and settings where masks are unlikely to be worn, such as industrial settings (167 distinct outbreaks), restaurants (121), retail settings (125) and child day care (69), to name a few.

An important correlate of the ruling class’ decision to ditch all health measures is its decision to withhold social and economic support for workers. Louisiana became the first Democrat-led state to end the federal pandemic unemployment assistance, which will go into effect on July 31.

The prioritization of private interests is evident in the \$37 billion state budget recently passed by the legislature. Having previously hinted at a \$1,000 per year raise for teachers, itself totally insufficient, legislators reduced this “raise” to \$800 for teachers and \$400 for support staff such as bus drivers and cafeteria workers. For the average teacher in the state, this amounts to a 1.5 percent increase, according

to 2018-2019 salary data. With inflation currently at 4.2 percent, teachers and staff can thus expect to lose money over the coming year.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a recent perspective, governments around the world are abandoning public health measures just as the Delta variant of the virus is spreading rapidly. It is on track to become the dominant strain in the US within a matter of weeks. Children under twelve, who are not currently eligible for vaccination, are at especially great risk from the continued spread of the virus. Scott Gottlieb, former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, recently told CNBC, “With these new, more contagious variants, I think we’re going to see that children and schools do become more of a focal point of spread.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the entire political establishment are washing their hands of responsibility in preventing another wave of infections and deaths, with CDC Director Rochelle Walensky stating that she “makes no promises” about implementing restrictions again. Joining the chorus of the ruling class, which needs all students in school so that parents can be forced back to work, she added, “I am leaning heavily on full in-person safe learning for all schools” for the fall semester. In a remarkable statement for one of the leading public health officials in the country, she told Yahoo News that she was “pretty humble when it comes to this pandemic at this point.”

The major teachers unions in the US, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have partnered with the political establishment throughout the entire pandemic to force teachers back into deadly school buildings. Despite dozens of wildcat strikes, protests and walkouts across the country over the past year, the unions refused to mobilize their membership in a unified struggle and isolated each outbreak of opposition.

In May, AFT President Randi Weingarten, who sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and whose salary of \$500,000 places her in direct conflict with the workers she supposedly represents, called for the full reopening of all schools, in-person, five days a week. Revealing the true motives of the back-to-school campaign, which is the linchpin of the broader back-to-work campaign, Weingarten said, “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.”

Educators in the US and internationally have been completely abandoned by their unions during the most difficult and dangerous crisis in recent history. One Montgomery, Alabama, teacher told the WSWS, “We feel abandoned. We have no support from them. I believe

they’re working in cahoots with [the] central office. We’re paying dues and yet have no support. We’re just not getting it. Even with school conditions with dilapidated buildings! The union is on the side of Montgomery Public School system, not us.”

It is in this context that the recent vote to form a union at the Bricolage Academy, a K-8 charter school in New Orleans, must be understood. The newly formed Bricolage Academy Educators United (BAEU) is an affiliate of the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), itself an affiliate of the AFT. The UTNO is an empty shell following the mass layoff of 7,600 teachers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Bricolage is the fifth charter school in the city to install a union, out of a total of eighty schools.

The aspirations that the union will “mean that our collective voices as educators will matter just as much as the voices of our Board members” and put “a formal system in place to help make decisions about what happens at Bricolage,” as voiced by organizer and educator Brittany Scofield to the *Lens*, will not materialize.

Whether in the education, health care, mining or auto industry, the unions have collaborated for decades with the corporations to force through concessions such as layoffs and wage and benefits cuts. The UTNO, as the WSWS wrote in 2016 on the institutionalization of charter schools in Louisiana, “has sought, with some limited success, to unionize the charters, effectively endorsing the privatization of education in exchange for the expansion of its dues paying membership.”

The United Auto Workers (UAW), with \$790 million in its strike fund, is currently starving roughly 3,000 striking Volvo workers in Virginia on \$275 a week. Recognizing that they are fighting a war on two fronts—against both the company and the UAW—workers formed a rank-and-file committee to fight for their interests. The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee’s Open Letter to the UAW outlines how the UAW is sabotaging the strike and what is actually required to win.

Teachers in Louisiana must learn the lessons of the past year, including the role of the unions in stifling rank-and-file opposition, and prepare accordingly. Independent, rank-and-file committees must be built, in international collaboration, to wage a genuine struggle against the ruling class’ and government’s abandonment of public health measures and ongoing assault on working conditions.



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