

“The days of unions fighting for workers’ rights are in the past”

Letter from a New York City teacher opposing the union-backed reopening of schools

27 July 2021

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting for a complete closure of schools in order to contain the pandemic, while demanding ample supports for remote learning and full income protection to allow parents to stay home with children. Our committee will meet this Tuesday, July 27, at 7 p.m. EDT to develop a plan to mobilize parents and educators against the full reopening of schools in September. We urge educators in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey to register here and invite your coworkers and friends.

The following letter was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by Teegan, a fifth-grade teacher in New York City’s borough of Queens. The recent news that 157 classrooms have been closed in public school buildings during summer school has deepened educators’ and parents’ opposition to the full resumption of face-to-face instruction On September 13.

One year has passed and United Federation of Teachers members are in the exact same state of limbo as we were in the Summer of 2020. Back then, we were being told that to get the protections we needed to go back into schools safely, we might have to strike. This message was met with understandably mixed feelings.

But lo and behold, at the 11th hour, our savior, UFT President Michael Mulgrew, made some back room deal with New York City’s Department of Education and guaranteed we would be safe in schools. We were promised weekly testing, ventilation systems, building closures after two unrelated COVID cases and adherence to the 6-foot separation rule.

All we had to give up was preps within the school day, being in the class with unmasked children while they ate breakfast and lunch and leaving school 30 minutes later than usual. In addition, we were given the wonderful opportunity to teach both remote and in-person students throughout the day, all while making the same salary. Thank goodness, we were told, Michael Mulgrew stood up for our rights and averted a strike or we could have really been screwed.

However, as the year passed, each of the promised protections eroded. The only source of ventilation in most schools was open windows, even though many schools didn’t have windows or if they did, the windows didn’t open. Testing was not being done on the correct percentage of school population. The Situation Room, which oversaw reporting positive cases, was a mess. Regardless of what we were being told, we watched COVID spread in our schools while our union told us how schools were magical, safe places.

Mayor Bill de Blasio eradicated the two-case rule and the UFT let it happen without a fight. The CDC reduced spacing from six feet to three feet and Mulgrew told us we would still be safe, since the UFT had done such a great job of getting some of us vaccinated. Friday night emails from the UFT telling us how it was in our best interest to lose another safety measure became common and predictable. Mulgrew held monthly town halls to tell us how hard he was fighting for us and how everything was the city, state and federal government’s fault.

Now, we are about to go into the 2021/2022 school year with no protections and no promises of safety. Our

union has been silent as the Delta variant sweeps the nation. Those teachers who were so blessed to have the UFT set up a vaccine appointment for them in the winter, are now coming to the end of their immunity window.

We're being promised two air filters per room, but we don't know if they will adequately filter the virus. De Blasio has completely nixed the possibility of a remote option and is demanding that all children return to classrooms, which were seriously overcrowded before the pandemic began. How are we going to maintain three feet of distance? Where will the children eat breakfast and lunch and be safely distanced the required six feet? Will those children who are not eligible for vaccines be required to wear masks? Will children over the age of 12 who may not have been vaccinated be required to wear masks? There are no answers to any of these questions and the sense that de Blasio, in his usual hubris, will take a page out of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's playbook and eliminate masks, school closures and quarantines.

Where is the UFT this summer, as a new wave of the pandemic threatens the fall? I suspect where they've been throughout this whole pandemic—safely ensconced in their well-ventilated, air-filtered offices, making closed door deals with the DOE and de Blasio that they will sell to the rank-and-file as the best they could have hoped for without once asking members for their thoughts or suggestions. And as the months pass, members spend another summer in limbo, wondering who will stand up for their rights.

But here, I propose, is where we are wrong. We are waiting for our union to stand up for our rights. We must stop looking at ourselves as union members and start looking at ourselves as union activists. The days of unions fighting for workers' rights are in the past.

We don't need any more proof than what we've seen this year—our safety and the safety of children was repeatedly negotiated, and the winner, time and time again, was the city. We've watched our union president tell us how lucky we were to make these givebacks. Our union seems to have its own agenda where the city is concerned, and the health and safety of members is not part of that agenda.

I implore you to educate yourselves and look at where unions in this country are heading. Look at recent strikes throughout the country—Volvo and Frito-Lay are

two examples where workers have been sold out by union leadership. It's time for us, as union activists, to join a global organization like the NYC Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which unites teachers, students, and parents who are willing to go to the street to fight for our rights. We can't sit by idly and wait for those who have their own agenda to negotiate for us. It's not going to end well. It's time for us to regroup and organize ourselves, before it's too late.



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