

Don't send children into unsafe schools!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (US)
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The drive to fully reopen schools across the United States must be stopped immediately. All scientific data on the Delta coronavirus variant proves that this policy will be an unmitigated disaster. It will deepen the horrific surge of infections and hospitalizations among children, the most vulnerable section of society, and will further the widespread community transmission throughout the country, causing an untold number of deaths among people of all ages.

The official debate has centered on whether or not masking should be required in reopened schools, with Florida, Texas and other Republican-led states enacting laws banning any mask mandates for schools and cutting off funding to districts that do not comply.

But whether or not students wear masks, the highly transmissible Delta variant will readily spread in tens of thousands of classrooms across the country. Last summer, an estimated 36,000 US schools had antiquated ventilation systems, the vast majority of which have not been renovated over the past year. Schools have long been identified as among the most important links in the chain of transmission, not only for COVID-19 but for a whole host of infectious diseases.

At present, almost all of the nation's roughly 13,800 school districts are scheduled to fully reopen for in-person learning in the coming weeks, with the majority offering remote learning only to the most at-risk children or not at all. This means that roughly 40 million unvaccinated children will be crammed into classrooms with 25, 30, 40 or more of their peers breathing the same air and being exposed to the airborne coronavirus.

A society has no greater responsibility than to protect its children, yet under the capitalist system their lives and health are being sacrificed everywhere. A pall of anxiety now hangs over millions of parents across the US who are being compelled to place their children at tremendous risk.

The dangers facing children cannot be overstated. Over the past week, before most schools have reopened in the US, child infections and hospitalizations have surged dramatically, reaching their highest point since the start of the pandemic. The American Academy of Pediatrics reported that last week 93,824 children officially tested

positive for COVID-19. There is an average of 225 new hospitalizations of children with the virus every day, a 27 percent increase from last week. In total, 813,000 Americans officially tested positive for COVID-19 last week and nearly 10,000 people are now hospitalized daily, with projections that more than 30,000 will be hospitalized daily by early September.

The most recent data from the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) found that roughly 10 percent of children aged 2–11 years and 13 percent of those aged 12–16 years reported at least one lingering symptom five weeks after contracting COVID-19, including debilitating symptoms affecting multiple organ systems. On a world scale, millions of children could suffer from these symptoms for the rest of their lives.

A recent study published in *The Lancet* found that people hospitalized with COVID-19 showed “substantial” cognitive performance deficits. Those placed on a ventilator lost roughly seven intelligence quotient (IQ) points, while those not ventilated lost roughly four points. A significant number who were not hospitalized but experienced respiratory difficulty lost between one and two IQ points, roughly equivalent to the effects of lead poisoning.

Under these conditions, the response of the teachers unions can be described as nothing less than criminal. On Sunday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten declared, “The number one priority is to get kids to be back in school.”

What a contemptible statement! No, the top priorities must be to protect children and to fully contain the pandemic.

Weingarten does not represent the 1.7 million dues-paying educators in the AFT. Rather, she represents corporate America. Alongside her counterpart Becky Pringle, head of the National Education Association (NEA), and hundreds of other union bureaucrats whose incomes and stock portfolios place them in the top two percent of society, Weingarten is embedded in the state apparatus and culpable in the policies that have led to mass suffering and death.

The teachers unions are the principal agents facilitating the Biden administration's push to fully reopen schools. Tens of millions of Americans voted for Biden after he declared that

he would “follow the science,” but this was immediately exposed as a fraud when he pushed to reopen schools at the peak of the pandemic in winter. On February 16, a day when 1,830 Americans died from COVID-19, he lied to a second grader at a CNN town hall event, “Kids don’t get ... COVID very often. It’s unusual for that to happen,” adding, “You’re not likely to be able to be exposed to something and spread it to mommy or daddy.”

Behind the deepening campaign to reopen schools, which coincides with the September 6 cutoff of federal unemployment benefits, is the imperative of returning parents to unsafe workplaces to boost corporate profits. As Biden’s top economic advisor Brian Deese stated last month, one of the primary factors behind the ongoing “labor shortage” has been a lack of “child care and school, particularly for parents of school-aged kids.”

All claims by the capitalist politicians that their aim is to help children learn are laced with hypocrisy. These same corrupt Democrats and Republicans sending children into perilous conditions have overseen decades of budget cuts, attacks on teachers and the funneling of public education funding to for-profit charter schools.

Had the necessary measures advocated by epidemiologists been taken in the critical months of January-March 2020, the pandemic would have been fully contained. But well-informed politicians in both parties, as well as the corporate media, downplayed the dangers and let the virus spread. Following the bailout of Wall Street in March 2020, the Trump administration, bolstered by every Democrat-led state, immediately began reopening nonessential workplaces and then schools, a process that has continued under Biden. As a result, 18 months later, over 634,000 Americans have officially died from COVID-19, with the real figure is estimated at over one million.

The same measures to eradicate COVID-19 that were advanced by scientists in January 2020—strict lockdowns, travel restrictions, widespread testing, contact tracing, and the isolation of infected patients, coupled with mass vaccination—remain the only means to reduce transmission of the disease and save lives. But these measures are out of the question for the capitalist elite, with White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stating Friday, “We’re not going to lock down our economy or our schools. ... We are not going back. We are not turning back the clock.”

At every stage of the pandemic, the interests that have determined policy have been the interests of Wall Street. This must end! The working class must intervene and enforce a policy that saves lives, not profits.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators and parents to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and political parties, to campaign for

and stop the drive to reopen schools.

The fight to stop this homicidal policy is in the interests of all workers. Rank-and-file committees should be developed in every factory and workplace, connecting opposition to school reopenings with a broader policy to stop the pandemic. This must include the demand for full income for all workers who are affected by the necessary measures to save lives.

The SEP makes a particular appeal to scientists and epidemiologists who understand the extreme danger of what is being done to speak out and help educate the population. The development of a movement of the working class to enforce the measures that are necessary requires that they be informed about what is happening and what must be done.

The development of a movement in the working class in the US should be connected to the struggle of workers throughout the world. The same manic drive to reopen schools and the global economy is unfolding in Brazil, Germany, Australia and on every continent. Last week, Chief Medical Officer of Health in Ontario, Canada, Dr. Kieran Moore stated, “We have to normalize COVID-19 for our schools.” The same issues confront workers everywhere, and the pandemic can only be contained on a global scale.

On May 1, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to organize workers in a common offensive to exert their collective strength, change the course of the pandemic and put an end to the needless suffering and death. The call for the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces until the pandemic is contained must be popularized in every school, factory, workplace and neighborhood across the US and globally. Preparations must be made in every country for nationwide general strike action, to coalesce in a globally coordinated strike movement.

All those who agree with this perspective should sign up to build a rank-and-file committee at your workplace today.



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