

US teachers unions campaign for opening COVID-infected schools

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The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Educators Association (NEA) are campaigning aggressively for the full reopening of schools for in-person instruction in the US, a policy that will guarantee a massive growth of infection, sickness and death among teachers, children and the population as a whole.

The spread of the more infectious Delta variant is responsible for a surge in daily deaths, now at 1,000. The total number of people hospitalized for COVID-19 has tripled over the past month. Over this same period, the number of children hospitalized surged to nearly 2,200, a more than 50 percent increase since the start of August. An average of 313 children are being hospitalized each day, and at least 24 died last week.

Sending children back to school under these conditions can only be described as criminal. Some 28 million schoolchildren between the ages of 5 and 11 are not eligible for vaccination, and only one third of 12 to 15-year-olds are inoculated.

Pediatricians and scientists are sounding the alarm. “It is scary to see the number and severity of COVID-19 cases rising in children with the Delta variant and so many kids still left unprotected,” Dr. Nusheen Ameenuddin, a community pediatrician at the Mayo Clinic, told CNBC. “The pandemic never stopped, and unfortunately, it only takes one lit match to reignite the inferno.”

“In the first nine days of school, there were 503 cases of coronavirus in Duval County Public Schools,” Dr. Mobeen Rathore at Wolfson Children’s Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida, told CNN. “We are not only preparing for acutely ill children but also MIS-C,” he said, referring to the multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children caused by COVID-19, which has affected 4,404 children and killed at least 37, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Far from opposing the mad policy of death, the AFT

and NEA, which falsely claim to represent nearly 5 million educators and staff, are aggressively campaigning for it.

AFT President Randi Weingarten is currently on a 20-state “Back to School for All” tour to push for fully in-person instruction. The AFT has sent \$5 million to union locals to campaign for students to return to the classroom. Local affiliates in New York and other states are producing promotional videos to convince frightened and concerned parents that it is safe for them to send their children to school.

“[O]ur members are going door to door to parents and to bring them back to schooling,” Weingarten told the *New York Times*.

Last week, Weingarten was at a Bronx elementary school with President Biden’s Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona, to back New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan to reopen the nation’s largest school district on September 13 without any remote learning option for the city’s 1.1 million students.

The Democratic Party mayor pledged that he will not allow any “disruptive” school closures this year. If someone tests positive, only unvaccinated close contacts will have to quarantine for 10 days. This is under conditions in which the Delta variant can be spread just as effectively by vaccinated adults as those who are unvaccinated.

To justify this criminal policy, Weingarten is feigning concern about the emotional and educational impact of remote learning on low-income students. “Kids need the social and emotional environments that in-school learning brings,” she said in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Such concerns, coming from the mouth of the multi-millionaire Weingarten, are no less hypocritical than they are coming from Democratic and Republican Party politicians and the corporate media.

The AFT and NEA have not conducted a single

campaign against budget cutting, school closures and the expansion of charter schools that have decimated public education for millions of working-class students. During the wave of teacher strikes in 2018–19, Weingarten and her NEA counterparts crisscrossed the country to isolate and crush the strikes, which were incipient rebellions against both the unions and the austerity measures they long supported.

As for the well-being of children, what about their health and their lives? And what of the emotional impact on children who see their classmates, teachers, parents and grandparents die from COVID-19? Worldwide, 1.5 million kids have lost parents, grandparents or other caregivers to the virus, according to a new study published Tuesday in *The Lancet*. Nearly 114,000 are from the US.

In Florida alone, 26 educators and five children died in August, or one educator a day and one child per week. This included 41-year-old Florida teacher Kelly Peterson who died from complications due to COVID-19. Because she was undergoing treatment for leukemia the beloved teacher was not vaccinated.

In fact, the AFT's campaign is aimed at bolstering the efforts of the entire political establishment to reopen schools so that parents can remain on the job pumping out profits for the corporate elite. In a public speech last May, Weingarten 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 and NEA President Becky Pringle have falsely claimed schools can be opened safely if mask mandates, social distancing and other "mitigation" practices are put in place.

Even if these measures were taken—which is doubtful given the chronic overcrowding, under-funding and poor ventilation in most public schools—it would have little impact on the spread of infections and deaths. One week after the Los Angeles Unified School District opened for half a million students on August 16, with a mask mandate, 6,500 students and 1,000 employees tested positive or were quarantined.

The "mitigation strategy" promoted by the Biden administration and the unions is little more than a few palliatives added to the homicidal herd immunity policy of Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and other fascistic Republicans.

The working class must fight for a policy of *elimination* and *eradication* of the virus. This requires the shutdown

of non-essential production and the closure of schools, together with universal testing, contact tracing and the isolation of infected individuals. This must be combined with the provision of full income to workers and small business owners affected by the shutdown, and a massive infusion of resources to provide high-quality remote learning for all children.

Leading scientists have made clear that this policy is feasible, and, with the assistance of powerful vaccines, can stop the pandemic in a matter of months.

"If we have transmission in the community, it's not safe to reopen schools, full stop," Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary explained at the WSWs online event, "For a global strategy to stop the pandemic and save lives!" this past weekend. "If we combine both vaccines and public health measures... we can stomp it out."

If such a policy had been implemented at the beginning of the pandemic, millions of lives would have been saved. It is all the more necessary now, with the virus again surging out of control in the US and internationally.

To fight for this policy, the working class must intervene, independently of the capitalist parties and their backers in the unions like the AFT and NEA, along with their counterparts in other industries. The upper-middle class bureaucrats like Weingarten are thoroughly hostile to the interests of educators and all workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for educators and parents to form rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighborhood to demand the immediate halt to in-person learning. This must be developed as part of a globally integrated movement of the entire working class through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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