

Ocasio-Cortez lures students into schools with “backpacks for all” amid skyrocketing COVID-19 hospitalizations

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Over the weekend, New York congresswoman and Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez held a publicity stunt in her district in the Bronx to promote the bipartisan campaign to reopen K-12 schools for in-person learning.

The campaign to reopen schools in the US and internationally is taking place against the backdrop of the rapid spread of the highly infectious Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus. The new variant has led to a massive spike in cases and hospitalizations, particularly among children.

For Ocasio-Cortez, as with the Democratic Party as a whole, the reopening of schools is treated as a foregone conclusion, whatever the risks. At the event, Ocasio-Cortez helped hand out 1,500 backpacks to children and their families. While addressing reporters, the congresswoman did not utter a word about the state of the pandemic, let alone the risks posed to children from the new variant.

Instead, the congresswoman concentrated her remarks on the wonders of the backpacks, which she boasted came in “a variety of bright colors.”

“We are out here making sure [the children] start off the school year with fresh backpacks and school supplies. So that everyone is really ready to rock this upcoming school year!” she explained to a swarm of news reporters. “Every single backpack has a suite of school supplies and also a personal note from me with some of my tips for helping youth thrive here in the Bronx,” she added.

One wonders what advice Ocasio-Cortez might offer students in order “to thrive” as children are packed into overcrowded and poorly ventilated school buildings

amid a raging pandemic that is hospitalizing thousands of children. How does she suggest that students cope with the loss of a teacher, a parent, a friend to the virus?

Driven by the reopening of schools throughout the country, the US reported 203,962 child COVID-19 cases and 23 new deaths in the week ending August 26, according to the latest report from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Two months ago, child cases stood at just 10,000.

Scientists and health experts are warning about the catastrophic impact of the reopening of schools. Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and a researcher at the University of Calgary, explained at an online event sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* last week: “If we have transmission in the community, it’s not safe to reopen schools, full stop. ...Unless we have no transmission, we shouldn’t reopen in-person schools.”

Together with Dr. Michael Baker, a public health physician and professor at the University of Otago Wellington Department of Public Health, and Dr. Yaneer Bar-Yam, founding president of the New England Complex Systems Institute, Gasperowicz warned that millions of children and young people would be infected if the reopening of schools was allowed to continue, and many would die.

Moreover, many experts are warning that there simply has not been enough research on the Delta variant and its possible long-term effects on child development. There are growing signs that many children may experience life-long cognitive complications after falling ill with the virus. In other words, the reopening of school is ultimately a dangerous social experiment in which the children are

the subjects.

The Biden administration is spearheading the reopening of schools, motivated by the imperative of the ruling class to force workers back to work and maintain the flow of corporate profits.

The Democrats are working closely with the trade unions and in particular the American Federation of Teachers, which is bankrolling a campaign to promote school reopenings. Just last week, AFT President Randi Weingarten visited an elementary school in Ocasio-Cortez's district with 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 meaningful remote learning option for the city's 1.1 million students.

As for the DSA, the organization has largely ignored the pandemic. Chapters across the US have organized similar events as the one held by Ocasio-Cortez to promote the reopening of schools. Promotional material and social media posts for one such event, hosted by the Las Vegas DSA chapter, does not even mention the pandemic.

At its biennial convention held last month, the DSA barely mentioned the pandemic, and the platform it adopted made no criticisms of the policies of the Democratic Party.

The world confronts a health crisis of historic proportions. Millions of people have died worldwide and millions more are at risk. In the face of this crisis the peddlers of Democratic Party politics can offer only death and backpacks. Images of the congresswoman ushering students back into schools under such dangerous conditions, without any acknowledgement that a worldwide pandemic is even taking place, should be burned into the consciousness of every worker and young person.

Ocasio-Cortez's role in supporting the reopening of schools exposes not just her as an individual, but more fundamentally the entire political strategy that she and the DSA promote. Her rise to office was orchestrated by two organizations, Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats, whose political function is to convince workers and youth that the Democratic Party can be reformed into a party that fights in the interests of the working class.

While campaigning for office, Ocasio-Cortez

appealed to voters' disillusionment with the Democrats. Since coming to office, Ocasio-Cortez has worked closely with the Democratic Party leadership in the House of Representatives and now the Biden administration.

In March of this year the Democratic Socialists of America's official magazine, *Democratic Left*, ran an interview with the Congresswoman in which she claimed that the Democratic Party was being "radically transformed" and called it "privileged" to criticize Biden from the left.

She insisted that pressure from the left had forced "almost a radical change" among entrenched Democratic leaders and denounced those on the left presenting a "bad faith critique" of the Biden administration.

As Ocasio-Cortez's backpack distribution stunt makes clear, this "bad faith" criticism applies to all workers and youth opposed to the policies of the ruling class that have led to the needless death of hundreds of thousands of people.

What is required to contain the pandemic is the shutdown of schools and nonessential production, with full compensation for workers, and a multi-trillion-dollar emergency public health program, including mass testing, contact tracing and quarantining. In order to carry out these policies, the working class must be organized on a politically independent and socialist basis. An essential first step is a decisive break with the Democratic Party and all those who claim it can be reformed.



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