Close New York City schools! Fight to eradicate COVID-19!

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
9 September 2021

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the plans to open schools by New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio on Monday, September 13. The exposure of hundreds of thousands of unvaccinated children to the highly contagious strain of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in the overcrowded conditions of the school buildings will result in the sickness of tens if not hundreds of thousands of children. An untold number of students will spread the virus to their families and communities. Vaccinated students and teachers will be exposed to the COVID-19 infection, which they can also transmit to the broader population.

The Delta variant is spreading like wildfire among children in school districts that have opened in recent weeks. Already, pediatric ICU beds are full in many areas where schools have reopened.

The COVID-19 mitigation measures in schools offered by the de Blasio administration are a cruel joke. Social distancing is nearly impossible in the crowded conditions of the city's school buildings. Mask wearing by children will be irregular in classrooms and hallways and non-existent in cafeterias. Ventilation ranges from inadequate to non-existent in thousands of classrooms.

The Department of Education (DOE) plan to test only 10 percent of children every other week, and only those "who have submitted consent for testing," will be unable to assess the spread of the virus. What other conclusion can parents and educators draw except that this a deliberate effort to conceal the extent of infection among children?

Isolation rooms are absent, and the DOE has said nothing about contact tracing. Vaccinated individuals who test positive for COVID-19 and are asymptomatic may continue to attend school.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has completely supported the back-to-school plan and has wrangled with the DOE over whether staff must be vaccinated. Through 18 months of the pandemic, the union has systematically opened the schools and dropped all test positivity benchmarks for closing them. In recent weeks, it has paid educators to go to families' homes and encourage them to attend school in person, as part of a broader nationwide campaign orchestrated by the national teachers unions.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), headed by former UFT President Randi Weingarten, has called for a full resumption of in-person learning, regardless of the spread of the Delta variant.

There is a method to this madness. New York City is the home of Wall Street and the politics of the Democratic Party, and the trade unions are in lockstep with the needs of the financial elite. Far from being a union in a conventional sense of the word, the UFT is a labor syndicate whose well paid officials seek to isolate educators and impose policies favorable to the corporations on them.

The most urgent need for the ruling class and its two political parties is to fully reopen the economy, regardless of the toll in lives of students, parents or educators, and that is what the UFT, the AFT and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) seek to implement.

One section of the Democratic Party, including members of the New York City Council, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and caucuses in the trade unions such as the UFT's Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), has rejected a call for fully remote learning and have instead called for a "remote option" by which parents could choose to continue remote learning for their children.

Our committee opposes the call for a remote option for two reasons:

First, it is a mitigation effort that it is disconnected from any broader strategy to eliminate and ultimately eradicate COVID-19. Many parents, who have been financially stricken by job losses or the threat of homelessness, will be forced to send their children into disease-ridden buildings. Other parents, who lack the necessary scientific education about pandemics and vaccines, should not have the "option" to send their children to death's door. The schools should be closed, and instruction should be fully remote.

Second, our committee does not believe that the struggle to shut the buildings should be disarmed by the politics of

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individual choice. We stand for a class policy in which working-class parents and educators of all races, religions and nationalities act collectively to preserve public health and adopt a program of action that will eradicate COVID-19 completely.

The bottom line is that those organizations and politicians that advocate a remote option still want the schools to reopen.

Schools must close as a first step to the eradication of the virus. Eradication cannot be accomplished by parents and educators by themselves. Only through the unification of the entire working class in the city will the necessary actions be taken to shut down schools and nonessential businesses while ensuring that all workers and small businesses do not suffer as a consequence.

This is a fight that the city unions will oppose. The Metropolitan Labor Council, made up of the leaders of all the city unions, has so little regard for the health of retired city workers that it downgraded their medical insurance this summer.

Workers all over the city along with educators and parents must form their own organizations to stop the pandemic. They must hammer out a program of action that will act for public health and safety. Our committee has fought since August 2020 to form new organizations in every school and every district so that parents, educators and older students will be able to express their views democratically, without fear of repercussions, and develop a program to fight for the right to health and life.

We call for a massive expansion of this effort. The working class must be independent! Not only must committees be formed among school bus drivers, sanitation workers, transit workers and office workers, as well as delivery workers and logistics workers, but rank-and-file action committees must reach out to students and youth all over the city, including those in public and private universities, as well as faculty and staff. Committees must be formed at New York University, Columbia University, the New School and throughout the City University of New York (CUNY) system.

The struggle to eradicate the virus cannot be limited to a single city, state or even country alone. It is a global struggle that must involve the entire international working class, fighting for mass vaccinations, lockdowns and support for workers who cannot work. Every person on the planet for whom the vaccine has been approved should receive it. On May 1, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was formed to promote this fight in every country.

Eradication will also require the closest connection with scientists and physicians and a program of mass scientific education for the working class.

In New York, we propose to take the first steps towards eradication—steps that are long overdue because of the resistance of the Republicans, who have promoted the policy of “herd immunity,” and the Democrats, who have tried to compromise with the virus by various mitigation efforts:

• Strike action by parents and educators to completely close the schools and return to fully remote learning.

• A fund of trillions of dollars—to be taken from the income of the billionaires and multimillionaires—to provide adequate income for parents who must stay at home.

• A restoration of unemployment benefits cut by the federal government and the state so that no worker is forced to seek work in an unsafe location and infect his or her family and neighbors.

• An immediate resumption of the eviction moratorium so that no working-class family is forced into homelessness.

• A program of mass testing, contact tracing and the safe isolation of all infected COVID-19 patients.

• Mandatory masking in all public venues.

• Mandatory vaccination for anyone eligible to receive it. Anyone who refuses to get vaccinated cannot be allowed to work beside others and should be furloughed until vaccinated.

• Training and hiring of hundreds of thousands of health care workers to alleviate the burden on a severely drained workforce.

• A program of mass scientific education on the nature of the pandemic, vaccines, and public health, to be created in the closest collaboration with trusted scientists and physicians.

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