

AFT partners with the far-right as workers demonstrate against global school reopenings

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On October 1, parents and educators around the world participated in an international demonstration against the deadly school reopening policies of the ruling elites worldwide. Initiated by UK parent Lisa Diaz and the parent group SafeEdForAll, the call for parents to keep their kids home from school on Friday was widely supported by workers in the UK, the US, Germany, Canada, Sri Lanka, Australia, Japan, France and other countries. The demonstration articulated the striving by the international working class for a scientific policy based on saving lives and eradicating COVID-19 once and for all.

A significant feature of the October 1 strike was that it was organized independently of the trade unions and capitalist parties. In every country in which workers participated, not a single trade union endorsed or even mentioned the event. This reflects the decades-long degeneration of the unions from genuine workers' organizations into arms of the corporations and state. This process has been sharply expressed during the pandemic, throughout which the unions have partnered with governments to coerce workers back into the schools and factories.

An online town hall held Thursday by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in partnership with the far-right parent group Open Schools USA (OSUSA) is a sinister example of this process. The panel featured four "scientists," including OSUSA's choices Jay Bhattacharya, co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) which calls for "herd immunity" through the natural infection of all young people, and Tracy Høeg, who opposes the use of masks by children and authored a discredited study that claimed COVID-19 vaccines led to more hospitalizations among adolescents than the disease itself. Deliberately seeking to legitimize their positions, the AFT allowed them to dominate the discussion.

The AFT could not stand more exposed. Educators widely denounced the event on Twitter for its affiliation with both OSUSA and the GBD, and attendance at the event itself was extremely low.

Additionally, the entire "mitigation" perspective that has

been pushed by the AFT, in coordination with the Democratic Party, supposedly in opposition to the ruthless "herd immunity" strategy of the Republicans, has been laid bare as a total fraud. From New York City to Chicago and other Democratic-led districts, the limited mitigation measures have been increasingly scrapped in the name of keeping schools open.

In her opening remarks, AFT President Randi Weingarten admitted that she had secretly communicated with OSUSA for the past six months. OSUSA is thoroughly hostile to public education and public health, calling for parents to disenroll their children en masse until schools lift mask mandates, vaccine recommendations and all social distancing measures. This is not the first time Weingarten has met with far-right and fascistic elements. In 2014, she traveled to the Ukraine to lend cover to the ultra-right nationalist coup, and in 2017 she met, also secretly, with Trump's fascist advisor Steve Bannon whom she called a "smart guy."

The point of the event was to "work together" toward the "shared goal" of keeping schools open, said Weingarten. She falsely insinuated that Erich Hartmann and Michelle Walker, the OSUSA members and the event co-moderators, represent "parents" and that Weingarten herself represents "educators." Painting a picture of hostility between educators and parents, she said, "Parents and teachers have to be able to talk to each other. We have to regain trust." In other words, the unions seek to find common ground with extremists and pseudo-scientists, while opposing the independent initiative of rank-and-file educators and parents who are fighting to end the pandemic.

The composition of the panel was also telling. Conspicuously missing were rank-and-file teachers themselves, parents who want the most robust safety measures including remote learning, and students.

Høeg, who claimed that she did not want to see children or adults get sick, used her time to downplay the risks of COVID-19 to children. She repeatedly touted the response to the pandemic by European governments, ignoring the fact

that the continent accounts for a quarter of all global COVID-19 deaths. The UK, which has not required students to wear masks at all in schools, registered over 59,000 cases in the first two weeks of this semester. Yet Høeg said she has not seen an “unacceptable number of outbreaks” in European schools.

Remarkably, Weingarten bestowed praise upon Høeg for a study on rural schools in Wisconsin, to which Weingarten said she was “indebted.” The WWSWS previously discredited the use of the study in drawing unscientific conclusions on the safety of reopening schools.

One of the most cynical moments of the night was Bhattacharya thanking educators for their work. He said, “what you do is perhaps the most important job in our society,” and then went on to thank himself as an educator. Bhattacharya is a close ally of Florida’s fascistic Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, among the most vicious opponents of public education. In August 2020, Bhattacharya served as Florida’s expert witness to provide the pseudo-scientific justification for DeSantis’ criminal school reopening policies. Policies guided by the philosophy of the GBD, that society should fully reopen no matter the rate of transmission, is what has led to children and K-12 educators dying at a rate of at least three per day since mid-August.

The AFT’s choice of panelists were Patrice Harris, a child psychiatrist and former president of the American Medical Association, and Irwin Redlener, a pediatrician, professor and director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at The Earth Institute at Columbia University.

While Harris injected racial politics and focused on the impact of the pandemic on minority communities, Redlener was the only one to attempt to put forward a scientific perspective. He repeatedly referred to the fact that over 207,000 children were officially infected with COVID-19 last week and rejected the notion that personal choice is a legitimate factor in addressing an unprecedented public health crisis. However, his opposition amounted to calling solely for mitigation measures in schools. Both Harris and Redlener failed to challenge the ludicrous statements made by Høeg, including the claim that children are 20 times more likely to be infected outside of school than in school, and no one denounced the far-right credentials of Bhattacharya, one of the foremost advocates of “herd immunity” through mass infections.

The bulk of the event was devoted to a ridiculous discussion between the four panelists on the single question of whether or not masks are effective. While Bhattacharya and Høeg repeatedly claimed that there was no good evidence for wearing masks, Harris and Redlener let them raise these doubts without any serious rebuttal. Multiple studies, including one done in Bangladesh, have shown

masks to be a critical tool in reducing the transmission of COVID-19.

Totally excised from the meeting was the possibility of eradicating COVID-19, which the world’s foremost epidemiologists, virologists and public health scientists have advocated for and made clear is entirely attainable. Not once were the words “eradication” or “elimination” uttered by any of the panelists. Walker voiced the need to “learn to live with” the virus, which no one challenged, and every participant agreed that schools should be open.

The entire event must serve as a grave warning to educators and parents in the US and internationally. Two months into the full reopening of schools in the US, the working class is increasingly animated by a massive opposition to the pandemic policies of the ruling elites. At the forefront of this struggle is the fight to close schools and stop child infections, embodied in the October 1 global online picket-line. It is under these conditions that the union bureaucracies, deeply connected to the capitalist state, see an important ally in the far-right, who will serve as a bludgeon against the growth of the class struggle.

But the working class, the only revolutionary force in capitalist society, will not stand for this. Lisa Diaz, in her video announcing the strike, spoke for millions worldwide when she said, “We’re sick of the lies. We’re sick of the gaslighting. We’re sick of you paying scientists to say ridiculous things like children don’t catch it in schools. We won’t take it anymore.”

As the trade unions seek to foster a working relationship with the most backward, far-right, and anti-scientific elements, the working class must draw the decisive lessons and resolutely break with these rotting institutions. The objective interests of the working class lie in mounting a worldwide movement to eradicate COVID-19. To carry out this task in the most conscious and scientifically guided manner requires building independent, democratic organizations that unite workers across all industries and national borders. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) will serve as the infrastructure for such a movement and will assist in coordinating the struggles of workers across the globe.



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