

Close New York City schools to protect children and stop the spread of COVID-19!

**New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
6 October 2021**

On October 3, the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met and authorized the following statement. All New York City educators, parents and student who agree with this statement should sign up today to join and help build this committee and register to attend our next meeting at 3:30pm on Saturday, October 16.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee salutes the international school strike of October 1, initiated by British parent Lisa Diaz and her collaborators, as a significant step forward in the fight to eradicate COVID-19 and protect the lives of children. The fact that the strike took on an independent character, outside of the influence of the British Labour Party and the unions—which have played the same treacherous role in opening schools as the Democratic Party and the unions in New York—is very significant and marks the beginning of a new kind of struggle to put an end to the pandemic.

The manner in which the strike became an international event confirms what our committee has believed since we were founded in August 2020: that the fight of educators and parents in New York for the health and safety of children and adults alike will find strong and determined allies not only in city workers but in working people around the world. The parent strike has inspired us to redouble our efforts for the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools, to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to protect the lives of unvaccinated children as the first step in a comprehensive global plan to eradicate COVID-19.

The Department of Education (DOE) has deliberately ignored basic mitigation measures to stop the spread of the virus, despite claims that it is doing so. Testing is limited to only 10 percent of students, provided they have a consent form. The DOE has abandoned efforts to ensure adequate ventilation in classrooms, to enforce the inadequate three-foot social distancing, and even to help teachers with the consistent masking of children. The personal protection measures in place are mandated only for show, what many denounce as “hygiene theater.”

The recent announcement by New York City’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio that children who were exposed to COVID-19 would no longer be quarantined if they were masked and socially distanced after September 27 is a stark abrogation of the basic human right to health and safety.

The de Blasio administration is pursuing a policy that will spread COVID-19 as far as the virus is able to go. The single enforced policy of the administration, mandatory vaccination for educators

and staff, is not sufficient to protect children and stop the spread of the pandemic. Furthermore, the disorganized and haphazard manner in which this measure is being implemented has caused a staffing crisis which has further exacerbated conditions in the schools.

Chaos now reigns in the largest public school district in the US. Teachers are not informed why whole classes are sent home. Administrators refuse to answer questions about outbreaks in the schools. Parents receive form letters that absurdly tell them another child in their child’s class has been infected but was not in contact with other children. The city has abolished standards by which it closes buildings when larger outbreaks occur. The corporate media complies with this by limiting its reporting on cases.

Educators and parents now rely on social media and word of mouth for reports of outbreaks. They are in fact being forced to devote their own time and resources to spread the word. This committee supports these efforts by rank-and-file workers but believes this must be organized and motivated by the perspective of informing the public as part of a broader strategy aimed at eradicating COVID-19.

The same reckless business motives at work “opening the economy,” including K-12 schools, are also responsible for the resumption of classes in buildings in colleges and universities in New York City. Remote education is being deliberately denied as an alternative to most students and faculty. Private institutions such as the New School, Columbia University and New York University (NYU) have dropped all pretense at social distancing and adequate air ventilation in classrooms. Despite vaccine mandates, outbreaks have occurred at both NYU and Columbia University.

To successfully wage a struggle for health and safety, educators, parents and students must be aware of the political obstacles that stand in their way. Not only the lying capitalist parties, but also the corporatist organizations that call themselves trade unions, have used every opportunity and spared no effort to fully open schools so that parents can go to work and make profits for Wall Street. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), headed by Michael Mulgrew, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), headed by Randi Weingarten, are among the most craven unions in the US today, spearheading the pro-corporate school reopening campaign.

On Monday, Mulgrew and Weingarten visited schools in Manhattan. At a press conference they praised the efforts of the

city to mandate vaccination for school employees, an effort that the UFT resisted, while falsely hailing the “great success” of opening schools.

Underscoring their total disregard for the safety of children, the vast majority of whom remain unvaccinated, Mulgrew and Weingarten were in complete agreement with the de Blasio administration. Earlier in the day, Chancellor of Schools Meisha Porter cynically stated, “New York City schools are the safest places to be.” In reality, there have already been 3,517 confirmed COVID-19 infections among students and staff, widely known to be a vast undercount given the inadequate testing.

Following this line, Weingarten stated, “We all want to stay back in school in-person.” She added, “The safety protocols are the way to stay in ... and we are super, super, super vigilant about safety protocols from vaccines to masks to ... actually making sure you have a good outbreak and quarantine process.” Weingarten went on to praise the “real partnership with management” and called for common work with the de Blasio administration.

This pageant will not surprise most New York educators, particularly if they watched the spectacle the AFT sponsored on September 30, when Weingarten hosted prominent herd immunity quacks Jay Bhattacharya, a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration which advocates “herd immunity,” and Tracy Beth Høeg, one of the authors of a study that falsely posits that schools are safe for children before the pandemic is contained. Alongside them, two representatives of the far-right parent group Open Schools USA, which sponsors anti-masking demonstrations and opposes testing for children, appeared on the panel.

Far from fostering a “dialogue” about opening schools, the only topic of debate was how exposed children should be to COVID-19. By sponsoring this forum, the AFT has turned sharply to the right in its efforts to fully open schools. It is encouraging the most noxious and bitter opponents of democratic rights and the health of the working class. It is legitimizing the pseudoscience of “herd immunity” exactly at the moment when educators and parents need accurate scientific information to survive.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the holding of this forum by the AFT. We warn that the AFT and UFT will go to any lengths and associate themselves with most reactionary and anti-scientific forces to keep schools open.

The days when educators could consider the unions as genuine workers’ organizations are long gone and the first condition of protecting their health and safety must be a conscious and thoroughgoing rejection of the AFT and UFT and the construction of independent rank-and-file committees.

In New York, as in the United States and internationally, these committees must be in the forefront of the fight to organize educators and parents to disseminate scientific information, to create channels of communication about the course of the pandemic in their schools, and to provide a program for the working class which can lead to the eradication of COVID-19.

Our committee proposes and fights for the following:

- Documentation and publication of all attempts by the de Blasio administration and the DOE to cover up or minimize outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools and neighborhoods.

- Fully remote learning for educators and students in public,

private and charter K-12 schools, as well as all institutions of higher learning, until at least 95 percent of the population, including children, is fully vaccinated and the spread of the pandemic is contained, as determined through mass testing and contact tracing overseen by trusted epidemiologists and scientists.

- Full financial and social support for parents who must stay home with their children until the pandemic is contained, to be provided for by heavy taxation on the city’s billionaires.

- Full funding and resources for high-quality remote learning, including high-speed broadband access for all and expert technical support to train and assist educators at K-12 schools and all institutions of higher learning.

- High-quality medical care for all workers, including city retirees who have had their plans downgraded.

We situate our struggle in New York in a broader global fight to eradicate COVID-19, which requires the following:

- A massive expansion and international coordination of vaccination programs, to ensure that the world population is quickly and safely vaccinated.

- Universal testing, contact tracing and the safe isolation of infected patients, to track and contain the pandemic in every country.

- The re-implementation of all COVID-19 preventive measures, including masking and the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces, while providing full support to workers and small business owners.

- A steep tax on the incomes of the multimillionaires and billionaires to fund the programs above.

All New York City educators, parents and students who agree with these demands and the fight to eradicate COVID-19 should sign up today to get involved and help build this committee as your fighting organization.



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