

More New York City schools forced to close amid mounting COVID-19 outbreaks

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Three schools have closed in the last week in New York City because of COVID-19 infections, including two public schools and one parochial school. The seven-day average of daily new cases in the city now stands at 1,209 and is steadily rising amid a nationwide surge as winter approaches.

P.S. 166 Henry Gradstein in Queens closed on November 10 and will remain closed for 10 days. Of the school's 894 students and 81 staff members, 31 have tested positive for the virus since the beginning of the school year on September 13, with 20 of these infections since the beginning of November.

On November 11, Village Academy in the Far Rockaway section of Queens was closed for 10 days. Of the 367 students and 48 staff, 25 have tested positive since the school year began, including 17 since the beginning of November. The media has noted that other schools co-located in the same building will remain open, a common practice when schools shut down.

One educator in Brooklyn told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the charter school parents and staff in the same building as her middle school received no notice of outbreaks of COVID-19. This is hardly surprising, given that the staff and parents at her school are also not informed, or only belatedly informed, of students who are sick or quarantining.

St. Demetrios School, a K-12 Greek Orthodox institution in Queens, closed on Monday after six people tested positive for COVID-19. The school will remain closed for only a week and educators are not mandated to get vaccinated at the school.

P.S. 169 Bay Terrace in Bayside, Queens, is under investigation for a COVID-19 outbreak. Seventeen of its classrooms have been partially closed.

According to the city's Department of Education (DOE), there are currently 176 classroom closures for public schools and 17 for charter schools. There are also 584 public and 39 charter school classrooms in which some of the students and staff are quarantined. New York City no longer has clear protocols for when a school or a classroom should be closed. The practice is not only irregular, but, as educators and parents report, actively concealed by the administration in many schools.

Highlighting the monumental failure of the city to adequately track the spread of COVID-19 in schools, a report by the

parents' group PRESSNYC found that of the 6,193 cases identified among public school students in the two months since schools opened, only 838, or 13 percent, were discovered by in-school testing, which is done once weekly for just 10 percent of students. If not for the vigilance of parents, the public would have no idea of how widespread the pandemic is in the schools.

Cases of COVID-19 have increased 31 percent in New York City in the last two weeks while state and city politicians, overwhelmingly Democrats, continue to relax COVID-19 mitigation measures. Last week, the New York State Department of Health released new guidelines for nursing homes, once the epicenter of COVID-19 deaths in the spring of 2020. Family members may now visit patients without appointments and do not need to show proof of vaccination or of a negative COVID-19 test.

On Thursday, New York's Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul tweeted, "Offices are still too empty and too many workers are at home—that has an impact on our economy and ripples across the entire city. I'm putting a stake in the ground: It's time to get back to the office."

In response, immunologist Dr. Anthony J. Leonardi, who has studied the long-term implications of COVID-19, tweeted: "This almost could not be clearer. Let me translate: Put your flesh, bones, and lungs in a building with everyone else because it drives 'consumption,' burns oil, and puts \$ in the pockets of rent-seekers (literally). Maybe try making buildings safe, first."

Educators in New York were even blunter, with one tweeting: "Sociopathic governor willing to kill us for her real estate donors."

In this frenzy of reopening, New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio also announced this week that the mass New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square will go forward, with masks required only for unvaccinated people. With a huge volume of tourists expected to attend, scientists have warned it will likely be a super-spreader event.

Many educators in New York, along with leading scientists, are anticipating a climb in COVID-19 cases during the winter months, especially after the Thanksgiving holiday. While thousands of children between the ages of 5-11 have been vaccinated in New York City, conditions in the classrooms

make the continued spread of COVID-19 inevitable as long as school is conducted face to face before the virus is eliminated.

The Department of Education (DOE) has made clear that it will stand for nothing less than full attendance in dangerous school buildings. The DOE recently sent the Administration for Children's Services to harass parents who have kept their children out of school because of concerns that they could contract COVID-19.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NYC-ERFSC), part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), has been the only organization calling for the closure of classrooms and high-quality remote education, as well as financial aid to parents who must stay home, as some of the first steps in a program to eliminate COVID-19 worldwide.

The NYC-ERFSC, like its sister committees at John Deere, Volvo, Mack Trucks, Dana auto parts and several educators rank-and-file committees across the US and internationally, has placed special emphasis on the so-called unions as the main impediment to workers' health, safety, decent income and working conditions.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has played a scurrilous part in the reopening of schools. Allied to Wall Street through the Democratic Party, these organizations have sought to force educators, school staff and children back into unsafe school buildings throughout the pandemic. The NYC-ERFSC rejects the false claim that these organizations can be reformed.

A case in point is the new joint slate in the UFT elections which is challenging the ruling Unity Caucus of Michael Mulgrew. The slate, known as United for Change, is comprised of various pseudo-left and liberal factions in the UFT, including the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), many of whose leaders support the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a faction of the Democratic Party.

The DSA in New York City has been mum about closing schools and nonessential businesses and opposing de Blasio's program of reopening. MORE itself has spent much of the pandemic sponsoring petitions to various Democratic Party members of New York City's City Council.

Seeking to capitalize on the mass anger of UFT members about the role played by Mulgrew and his cronies in opening schools, the first line of United for Change's initial press release states, "UFT members have watched as their union failed to keep unsafe schools closed."

Closer examination of the documents shows that the United for Change slate makes no pledge to close the schools as the pandemic worsens but will actively work to keep schools open. One of the slate's leaders, MORE member Annie Tan, is quoted in the press release as saying, "I am inspired by the examples of Chicago and Los Angeles that won many more protections than New York because they have unions that listen to their teachers."

In fact, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), both led by DSA-leaning "reform" caucuses, have played a despicable role during the pandemic, stifling opposition and allowing the schools to reopen in person.

Significantly, the platform makes no mention of AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has worked to elevate the ideas of the far right and herd immunity quacks. The statement also ignores the strike wave across the United States, including the ongoing strike by Columbia University graduate student assistants, which is being actively betrayed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership.

If elected, the United for Change leadership would continue the current policies of the UFT, which serves to suppress the class struggle rather than advance it. If the UFT were forced on strike by the anger of its membership, it would behave precisely like UAW Local 2110, which is currently isolating the Columbia University student worker strike and throwing it to "impartial" mediation.

The Columbia University strike, along with the strike at John Deere, is decisive for educators. It is possible to break from the grip of the "unions" now, but only by expanding the strike and taking over its management with an independent rank-and-file strike committee, to unite with the NYC-ERFSC and other committees that formed across the US and globally. The need to eliminate COVID-19 and the need of the Columbia strike to expand represent essentially the same issues: the lives and the social rights of the working class.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will discuss these issues at its upcoming meeting at 2:00 p.m. this Sunday, November 21. All educators, parents and students in New York City and the surrounding region, as well as striking graduate students at Columbia, are encouraged to attend and build the meeting as widely as possible.



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