

AFT President Randi Weingarten sabotages “safe schools” town hall

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On Tuesday, a Facebook town hall event co-hosted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the parents group Parents for Responsive Equitable and Safe Schools (PRESS NYC) was abruptly canceled after AFT President Randi Weingarten attempted to invite *Atlantic* writer Lucy McBride onto the panel.

The effort to include McBride was meant to accommodate right-wing and far-right parents with whom Weingarten and the AFT have formed a close relationship in recent months. It takes place after more than 800,000 Americans have needlessly died due to the reckless reopening of workplaces and schools enforced by Weingarten and other multimillionaire union officials.

The town hall, which had been planned for over a month, was billed as “a discussion with leading public health experts from across the country on ways school communities can be kept safe this winter and beyond.” It was going to be moderated by Weingarten and PRESS NYC Steering Committee member and neuroscientist Dr. Kaliris Y. Salas-Ramirez.

PRESS NYC is a parents advocacy group based in New York City formed near the start of the pandemic. It has sought to pressure local Democratic Party politicians to implement mitigation measures in schools and provide a remote learning option to city parents on an individual basis.

The town hall panelists included Drs. Jorge Caballero, Theresa Chapple-McGruder, Robert Darnell, Alex Huffman and Julia Raifman, all of whom have advocated for schools to implement the strongest possible mitigation measures to try to limit the spread of COVID-19.

According to a thread by PRESS NYC, the panelists were agreed upon weeks ago. On Sunday, however, Justin Spiro, a New York City school social worker who supports fully reopening schools and lifting mask mandates, tweeted a photo of the event with the comment, “I thought school closures were safely off the table this winter. I was wrong. Dr. Salas-Ramirez is a fierce ‘remote learning’ advocate, and she is moderating an AFT Town Hall. I will fight with every fiber of my being if they try to shut schools down again. Who’s with me?”

This prompted Lucy McBride to write, “I spoke to @rweingarten today to ask if I could join the panel. She seemed quite enthusiastic and told me she’d ask the organizers. She

called me later this afternoon to say that the other organizers said ‘no.’ My offer still stands.”

McBride is widely loathed by educators, in particular for her October 2021 article, “A COVID Serenity Prayer,” in which she stated: “The virus will be woven into our everyday existence much like RSV, influenza, and other common coronaviruses are. The question isn’t *whether* we’ll be exposed to the novel coronavirus; it’s *when*.”

Her article continued: “Many of us will inevitably get COVID-19.” In line with the global ruling class, she insisted that the population accept living with COVID, cynically arguing that humans have always “co-existed” with threats, such as car accidents, violence and sexually transmitted diseases—as if these problems of an entirely different nature, which themselves could be eliminated from society given the proper resources, are grounds to accept the perpetual spread of a deadly virus with long-term consequences.

Immediately seeking to accommodate McBride and Spiro, Weingarten publicly endorsed the last-minute addition, writing, “I think @drlucymcbride should be on the panel but I respect that we are doing this townhall with others and I respect the process we set up. We will do more and we will invite @drlucymcbride to join another townhall.”

This prompted far-right forces around Weingarten to go on the offensive. Advancing the lies that pervade the swamp of the far-right, they falsely claimed that COVID-19 has no real impact on children, ignoring the fact that nearly 1,000 children in the US alone have died from the virus and potentially millions could be suffering from long-term debilitation.

Speaking to the personal attacks against him, Dr. Caballero, in a thread explaining the event’s cancellation, said that he and other “BIPOC participants had been subjected to concerted campaigns of harassment online” following the announcement of the event last week. Both Caballero and PRESS NYC criticized Weingarten for emboldening these attacks by trying to accommodate rather than condemn them outright.

Following the cancellation, Weingarten issued a statement in which she evaded responsibility and said she “regretted” that PRESS NYC pulled out. Notably, she claimed that we are “in the wake of the pandemic,” just over a week after the World Health Organization declared Omicron, which is rapidly

spreading across the globe, a variant of concern.

Emma Pelosi, a special education teacher in New York and member of the AFT, rightfully pointed out in an open letter to Weingarten and the AFT on Twitter that it was highly unusual and disruptive for Weingarten, at the last minute, to publicly disagree with the decision of the organizers and panelists not to add McBride.

Under conditions in which 1,500 Americans are dying every day and the Omicron variant is spreading widely, the Biden administration's vaccine-only approach stands thoroughly exposed. Since taking office, Biden and the Democratic Party have made the full reopening of schools their main domestic priority in order to force parents back into unsafe workplaces. At the same time, more Americans have died from COVID under his presidency than under Trump's.

Deliberately ignoring the advice of scientists and public health experts on the necessary public health measures to eliminate the virus, the Biden administration is criminally indifferent to the lives of millions across the planet who continue to face mass infection, death, and long-term illness.

It is possible, even likely, that Weingarten, extremely sensitive to widespread opposition to her role in forcing educators and students into deadly school buildings, deliberately sabotaged the event.

The panelists, who have drawn attention to the dangers that COVID poses to children and who have pointed to the inadequate mitigations in schools, would have, even unwittingly, exposed her. A number of panelists have also criticized the Biden administration for its ineffective response to the Omicron threat, while Weingarten has endorsed Biden's "test to stay" program, making clear her commitment to keep schools open no matter the danger.

While PRESS NYC has sought to frame the attacks largely in racial terms, the fundamental issue is the far-right's attempt to spread misinformation about the pandemic and force the population to accept mass infection and death. This is the latest in a long series of increasingly brazen attacks against scientists, public health officials and anti-COVID activists. These include attacks against Kristina Lawson, executive director of the Medical Board of California, who was stalked by a COVID disinformation group, and a protest against public health measures held outside the home of Dr. David Colby, medical officer of health in Chatham-Kent, Ontario.

The Democratic Party and its media mouthpieces like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are themselves responsible for fostering such attacks, through the promotion of the Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory and the libelous attacks on zoologist Peter Daszak.

This episode continues Weingarten's adaptation to the far-right. On September 30, the AFT co-hosted an event, which the WSWs termed a town hall of death, with far-right parents group Open Schools USA (OSUSA), which gave a platform to anti-mask pseudo-scientists such as Tracy Høeg and Jay

Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya is an author of the Great Barrington Declaration, which calls for the widest possible infection of young people to achieve a mythical "herd immunity."

The earlier event sought to justify the scrapping of what limited mitigations remain in schools, which both Republican and Democratic districts across the US have systematically carried out since schools reopened this semester. At the same time, it showed educators and concerned parents the type of people the AFT is prepared to mobilize against them, with Weingarten admitting to having been in secret communication with OSUSA for six months. Members of OSUSA were among those who denounced PRESS NYC and the panelists before the event was canceled.

No stranger to fascistic layers, Weingarten travelled to the Ukraine in 2014 to prop up the ultra-nationalist coup, and in 2017 she secretly met with fascist Steve Bannon, who she said was a "smart guy."

The urgent lesson to be drawn is that any orientation to the unions is a dead end for workers. Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee and a multimillionaire, is irreconcilably hostile to the interests of AFT members. Contrary to the claims of the far right, Weingarten would have resolutely called for all schools to remain open had the town hall taken place.

Furthermore, her affiliation with fascistic forces is a grave warning that she sees in them a critical ally for intimidating and silencing all opposition from educators and parents, under conditions in which workers are carrying out a historic strike wave, ever more consciously in defiance of the trade unions.

The immediate, temporary suspension of in-person schooling and non-essential workplaces is absolutely necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. This must be combined with full income protection for workers and small businesses, and a vast mobilization of all available public health tools including universal testing, contact tracing, safe isolation of infected patients, high quality respirators, and a retrofitting of school buildings with proper ventilation and filtration systems.

These measures must be utilized as part of a globally coordinated strategy to eliminate COVID-19, which the most far-sighted and honest scientists agree is not only possible but necessary.

What is required of educators, parents and other workers committed to the fight against COVID-19 is to build a mass movement internationally through the expansion of the network of rank-and-file committees that have already been formed, independent of the corrupt trade unions and capitalist parties. Contact us today to join or build a committee in your area.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)