

“It is a crime that they allowed kids to come back to school”

Philadelphia high school switches to virtual learning after teachers threaten sickout strike

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Late Sunday night, the administration of Olney Charter High School in North Philadelphia gave in to teachers’ demands that the school switch to virtual learning in an attempt to stop the spread of COVID-19 on campus.

Teachers at the school, including members of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, have been pushing for a return to virtual learning as the pandemic continues to explode throughout the area and across the country, fueled by the return to in-person classes since August.

The demand for virtual learning took on a further urgency after the tragic death of Olney senior 17-year-old Alayna Thach this past Monday. Last week, roughly 80 percent of the teachers signed a petition demanding a return to virtual learning and had organized a sickout strike for Monday after school administration initially rejected their demands. At a memorial held after school Friday, both teachers and students denounced the school as unsafe and called for a switch to virtual learning.

Educators and school staff at Olney should be proud of their achievement, which shows the power that they have. However, they should not let their guard down. The administration did not want to do this; they were forced by the growing anger of teachers, students and parents over Alayna’s death. They, with the support of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), will seek to use these two weeks to come up with one or two cosmetic changes and declare it safe to reopen the school.

Funeral services for Alayna were held over the weekend. All who knew Alayna describe her as a caring child who was full of life and hope. She was an honors student who was planning to attend college next year and was hoping to become a life coach.

Alayna’s aunt, Hien Yem, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that Alayna always had a cause and most recently was trying to start a petition to allow students to eat lunch outside.

Yem had asked her, “Don’t you think you’ll be cold?” Alayna replied, “Yeah. But we’ll be safe.”

Alayna and her 5-year-old brother, Vance, and 9-year-old sister, Emma all got sick with COVID-19 in early December. Last Sunday, December 12, Alayna was rushed to the hospital as the disease worsened and she was having difficulty breathing. The next day, doctors told the family that they had done everything they could to help her.

Alayna’s parents were fully vaccinated, while she and her

brother and sister were scheduled to get vaccinated in just a few weeks.

Along with sadness and shock, there is a growing mood of anger in the community, as well as the sense that Alayna’s death could have been prevented. Teachers have denounced the school administration’s lax attitude towards safety measures, including inadequate enforcement of masking policies.

In addition to the growing sentiments in favor of the switch to remote learning, staff at Olney Charter have called for other measures, including the application of random COVID-19 testing, contact tracing and provisions to ensure that all students have access to the necessary technology to participate in remote learning.

Teachers who work at the school have pointed out that since reopening in the fall, classes were overcrowded, students were cramped together in the cafeteria during breakfast and lunch where they did not wear their masks, and halls and bathrooms lacked proper air ventilation or filters.

In September, teachers had proposed that the school hold vaccination clinics for the students and the community. The school administration only agreed to the proposal one or two days before the clinic was scheduled, then canceled it after saying not enough students had signed up.

On Sunday, things came to a head. In response to the organized sickout, school administration declared it a violation of the teachers’ contract and threatened them with discipline. However, at around 6 p.m., teachers were told the administration agreed that the school would be virtual this week and the first week of January.

Teachers were told to come to the building and that they would give their lessons virtually. At first, teachers thought they may have won, but then soon realized this could be a trap, as students were not being told to stay home. Teachers decided to proceed with their sickout.

A teacher at Olney told the WSWS, “There is concern that the admin may have done this as a trap. They never communicated any of this to students, making this an altogether different type of conflict - more akin to a street fight.”

By 10 p.m., realizing that the teachers had not given into their intimidation or trap, administration informed students and parents that the school was closing and switching to virtual learning.

Alayna is one of nearly 1,000 children under 18 in the US who have had their lives cut short by COVID-19. In the case of Alayna, her death is the direct result of policies that were pursued by the Democratic administration of Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf. Following the official line of Biden, who declared the pandemic over, Wolf lifted nearly all restrictions on businesses over the summer, and proceeded towards a full reopening of the schools, crowding millions of unvaccinated children and youths into classrooms and school buses.

Philadelphia County, along with the rest of Pennsylvania and the United States, has seen an exponential growth in COVID-19 cases, fueled by the abandonment of containment measures and the unmitigated reopening of businesses and schools. December 18 saw 999 new cases in Philadelphia County, with a 7-day average of 675 reported infections.

Pennsylvania is reporting more than 8,500 new infections per day, an increase of more than 50 percent in just two weeks. On Wednesday, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf requested that the federal government send health care workers to assist hospitals and nursing homes that are overwhelmed by the deluge of cases and the shortage of staff.

While the surge in cases is still driven primarily by the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2, the highly transmissible Omicron variant has been detected in Pennsylvania. Owing to the complete lack of organized containment measures, Omicron is certain to be spreading rapidly and exponentially among the population.

The policy of Biden and Wolf was driven by the economic interests of the corporate and financial elite, which required that children return to school so that their parents could return to work. This policy has been aided and abetted at every turn by the unions.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) enforced the dictates of Biden, acting as a labor police force to suppress and derail opposition among educators and school staff to the reopening policy. Along with the Biden and Wolf administrations, they bear responsibility for the entirely foreseeable catastrophe that has unfolded. To date, the PFT has issued no statement on Alayna's death.

At Friday's memorial, the Pennsylvania state representative for the American Federation of Teachers voiced support for the call for online learning. This is a complete lie designed to deceive teachers. The PFT played a particularly hideous role last spring in the reopening of Philadelphia schools, organizing so-called experts to verify that each school was "safe" for students and could be reopened.

The decision of the administration at Olney to agree to teachers' demands to shut for two weeks is not out of concern for the students. They will use this time to conspire with the AFT to make a few cosmetic changes as the basis for reopening.

The WSWS spoke with one of the members of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at Olney on Sunday about Alayna's death, the conditions at the school and the need for a continued struggle.

"Alayna is just like my daughter. It is horrible, this young person with a life in front of her and all that being lost. She was building her life, the horror of that being taken away from her."

Explaining that the school is not safe for students, the teacher said that students have to eat their lunch in a crowded cafeteria, noting, "every single day for the last four months they have to eat without masks in one room all together."

The teacher commented, "It is a crime that they allowed kids to come back to school. Thousands of students are in hospitals and ICUs, this is not just one school, but all schools, the reopening of schools has been a policy of social murder.

"This is the responsibility of the municipality, state and federal government. They have pushed for the reopening of schools. Every statement that I have heard from Biden has been to play down the danger and push the reopening of in-person learning. They want to proceed as if nothing is happening.

"The AFT has consistently advocated for schools to be open. I have not heard anything from the top against the schools being open. In fact, just the opposite, they too have been pushing for the schools to be reopened. Our committee has been advocating for the shutdown of the schools. We are concerned about what this means for the parents who are unable to work.

"If you look at what's happened during this horrible pandemic, billions have been turned into trillions for the rich. This money should be used for the saving of lives. We have to put people over profits. This pandemic should not be causing people to be homeless; it should not be pushing people to destitution. Instead, this money should be used so that everybody can remain safe.

"I strongly encourage teachers at all schools to join rank-and-file committees for the purpose of correcting this horror being done by the government and the union leadership."

The forcing of Olney to switch to virtual learning is an important step, but it is only the beginning. After all, if it is unsafe to operate Olney, then it is unsafe to keep any of the schools opened in Philadelphia or throughout the state.

Teachers at Olney should appeal to educators in the entire Philadelphia area, as well as students and other workers, to join their struggle to shut down all in-person learning and nonessential services as part of the deployment of all available public health measures to stop the pandemic.

Teachers must draw the lessons of the past two years and place no faith in the AFT or PFT. These organizations do not represent teachers, but act as a police force against the working class.

Since fall 2020, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Committee has been organizing educators throughout the state and region to fight on the basis of the needs of educators, students and the communities, in opposition to the homicidal pandemic policies that represent the interests of the rich. For more information about joining this fight, email the committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.



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