

Stop the reopening of New York City schools! Mobilize the working class to save lives, not profits!

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
31 December 2021

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee calls on our colleagues throughout the city to organize in order to stop the reopening of schools on January 3, and keep students in virtual learning until the virus is under control and schools are safe. This must be connected to a broader fight by the working class to shut down nonessential industry, with full compensation for affected workers through a tax on Wall Street's windfall pandemic profits.

The number of infections from the Omicron variant has skyrocketed. On December 29, over 67,000 confirmed infections were reported in New York state, roughly quadruple the peak in previous surges. Hundreds of thousands of city residents—soon to be millions unless measures are taken soon—have been infected with the virus. The variant is infecting both vaccinated and unvaccinated people, with unknown consequences for years and likely decades to come.

The scale of infections is already seriously challenging society's ability to function. One-third of all Emergency Medical Technicians in New York City are sick with COVID. One subway line has been closed because transit workers are too ill to operate it. Reports indicate that hundreds of critical infrastructure workers, such as those at the energy provider Con Edison, are ill. For weeks, over-the-counter tests were unavailable in stores and from the government. Lines at testing centers, according to the latest data from the city, have minimum waits of one and a half hours, and over 30 testing centers have closed.

In the week before the winter holiday, over 12 schools closed because of COVID infections, and some classrooms were emptied out by infections. In other schools, children were crowded into auditoriums because too many educators were sick to teach them. Child hospitalizations in the city have quadrupled in two weeks.

Educators and students were sent home for winter break with a sense of foreboding of what schools would look like when they return on January 3.

But New York City is only in the forefront of mass infection from the Omicron variant across the United States. The situation in the rest of the country is only a few days behind us.

All of this was avoidable. The experience in countries in the Asia Pacific, especially China, show that through the use of long-established practices such as quarantining, contact tracing and testing, the spread of the coronavirus can be stopped. Even now, with concerted action on a world scale, this coronavirus pandemic can be brought under control within the space of a few months.

The uncontrolled spread of Omicron has been made possible by the complete rejection of such measures by Wall Street and its servants in both political parties, who have declared in unison that the "cure can't be worse than the disease." This reached a new stage this week when the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reduced the recommended quarantine period from 10 to five days.

The perverse logic behind the decision, openly defended by CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, is that *relaxing* these health guidelines is necessary because an anticipated *increase* in cases will potentially constrain the labor supply, leaving workplaces without enough workers out of quarantine to function. This amounts to an open declaration that government policy is to keep people on the job and allow as many people as possible to be infected, sacrificing human lives for profit.

In a recent address, Biden lied to the public, claiming that lockdowns of schools and workplaces are unnecessary because the hospital system is supposedly better off than it was at the start of the pandemic. He even

rejected quarantining students exposed to COVID, and encouraged people not to cancel holiday travel plans. He offered no meaningful new measures to address the spread of COVID, and doubled down on his vaccination-only COVID policy, which has already ended in catastrophe.

In New York, Democrats have insisted that schools must reopen after the winter break, precisely when the Omicron surge is expected to peak. Children will no longer be quarantined after infections if they test negative on a home test. At a media event on Tuesday, December 28, Mayor Bill De Blasio, Governor Kathy Hochul and incoming mayor Eric Adams all promoted the vaccine-only program and ruled out the closing of schools or other non-essential workplaces during the Omicron surge.

In this, they have the support of the unions, including the United Federation of Teachers, which has worked hand in glove with the city and state administrations to keep schools open.

Incredibly, they have not only not canceled the annual New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square, but Adams himself will be sworn in as mayor at the event, meaning his administration will literally begin in a super-spreader event in which countless attendees will be infected.

The overriding priority of the political establishment is the safeguarding of the profit interests and share values of the rich, no matter the cost in human lives. The consequence of this is that more than 840,000 people in the United States alone have already been needlessly lost.

If the pandemic is ever to be brought under control, the policies taken must be motivated by an entirely different set of social interests. Therefore, the New York City Educators Rank-and-Files Safety Committee calls on teachers and workers to take matters into our own hands, and fight for a policy which prioritizes human life over profits.

In carrying out this fight, we endorse the principles laid out in the recent open letter by the Socialist Equality Party, which include:

- The present policy of "herd immunity"—i.e., allowing COVID-19 to spread throughout the population—must be repudiated. A new strategy, directed toward the elimination and eradication of SARS-CoV-2 must be adopted.

- The policies implemented to stop viral transmission must be determined by the needs of public health. The protection of human life and safety must take absolute and unconditional priority over all corporate-financial interests. The costs of fighting the pandemic—including

the payment of wages and salaries, compensation to small business owners, full medical coverage for the ill, and payments to bereaved families—must be borne by corporations and a 100 percent tax on the windfall pandemic profits obtained by large investors through the run-up in the stock market.

- The fight against the pandemic must be conducted on a global scale. The pandemic cannot be stopped unless SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated in all countries. American workers must demand that vaccines be provided in necessary quantities, free of charge, to their class brothers and sisters in the less developed countries.

In the first instance, **teachers must organize actions to force a halt to the reopening of schools for the spring semester next week**, or to force them to shut down again as soon as possible. All nonessential workplaces throughout the city must also be shut down, not to reopen until the buildings are genuinely safe—that is, once the spread of the virus has been brought under control and a system of mass contact tracing and testing is in place which can quickly suppress all new outbreaks. Full wages must be guaranteed during the shutdown, to be paid for out of the trillions of dollars wasted on Wall Street speculation during the pandemic.

The fight for these measures can only be conducted by teachers and workers ourselves—not the political establishment, not the media and not the pro-corporate trade unions. To organize this fight, rank-and-file committees must be built at every school, consisting of teachers and other school employees and excluding administrators and union officials, to fight for a shutdown. These committees, advised by serious medical scientists, must the ones to determine when schools are safe to reopen, and oversee the implementation of all safety measures to ensure they are not sabotaged again for the sake of profit interests.

All educators, parents who support this program should immediately join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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