

New York City educators, parents and students must act now to close schools to stop the spread of COVID-19!

**New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
4 January 2022**

An emergency meeting of the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NYC-ERFSC) was held on January 2. Seventy-nine teachers, parents, and other workers from the city and surrounding school districts, as well as educators from Pennsylvania, attended the online meeting.

The meeting was held the day before local and state Democratic Party politicians reopened the largest school district in America, sending more than one million students and more than 100,000 school employees back into dangerous buildings. Those attending the meeting expressed their determination to stop this criminal action.

One Pre-K teacher told the meeting, “The city has decided to prioritize economics over the lives of students and teachers.” A Brooklyn middle school teacher told the meeting, it was “just a fact that schools aren’t a safe place.” A parent added, “the government doesn’t care. Their kids and grandkids aren’t going through this.”

Participants discussed the Socialist Equality Party’s open letter to the working class, “The pandemic must be ended and lives saved in 2022!” and outlined a policy to mobilize educators, parents and other workers, including health care, transit and service workers, to close the schools and non-essential businesses as part of the fight to stop the transmission of the virus and eliminate it. To fight for this, speakers at the meeting stressed the need to build the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NYC-ERFSC) and expand the rank-and-file safety committees, which have been organized independently of the United Federation of Teachers and other corporatist unions.

The meeting commissioned the following statement.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on educators, parents and students to immediately organize the shutdown of in-person instruction in the New York City school system to stop the infection of hundreds of thousands of children and the community spread of COVID-19.

Educators should build rank-and-file safety committees at every school, independent of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the Democratic Party of Joe Biden, Kathy Hochul and Eric Adams. These committees should organize strikes, sickouts and other collective action to close the schools, stop the transmission of the deadly virus and save lives.

Appeals for joint action should be made to transit workers, firefighters and EMS drivers, hospital and nursing home workers and all those being ravaged by COVID-19 and the criminal indifference of the corporate and political establishment, which is more concerned with profit than human lives. Along with schools, non-essential businesses should be closed and full income provided to workers and

small business owners until transmission is reduced and public measures are implemented to eliminate the virus once and for all.

The situation is urgent. The city’s seven-day positivity rate is 33.49 percent and with a daily average of 36,856 city residents testing positive on January 2. This is nearly seven times higher than the average of 5,387 people who were infected at the height of the first surge of COVID-19 on April 16, 2020, when city schools were closed.

On January 2, 5,308 people in the city were hospitalized with COVID-19, according to the New York Department of Health, an increase from 1,000 on December 16. Pediatric hospitalizations have increased by five times in the last two weeks. At some New York hospitals, pediatric intensive care units are full. Over 400 people have died of COVID-related conditions in the last two weeks alone, bringing the city’s death toll to over 59,200 since the pandemic began.

Because so many workers are sick, essential city services have been severely disrupted. Over one third of emergency medical technicians and nearly 20 percent of all firefighters are ill. The electric utility Con Edison has counted over 500 workers off the job due to sickness. Less than two weeks ago, about 170 transit workers were ill. The number today is unquestionably higher. At least three subway lines have been closed and others have been forced to downgrade service, increasing the crowding on subway cars and undoubtedly helping the transmission of the virus. Experts anticipate that cases will continue to climb for weeks.

Schools reopened on Monday to chaos. According to figures released by the Department of Education (DOE), at least 300,000 students did not attend class in buildings without access to remote learning. Some of this is doubtless due to a boycott of unsafe schools by parents, and some because of the spread of COVID-19 among children. Teachers reported on social media large absences in some schools and severe staffing shortages at others as educators report sick or simply refuse to go in. One principal on social media announced she was forced to close her school because of staff shortages.

The official reopening of schools yesterday was based on a series of well-worn lies told by the Democratic politicians.

The newly installed mayor, Eric Adams, on the Sunday ABC-TV news show “This Week,” said, “You can’t view yourself as in the crisis, we have to view ourselves as past the crisis. If we close down our city, it is as dangerous as COVID.” The mayor insisted that schools would not be closed, making it clear that this was not based on public health needs but on “keeping our economy operating.”

When told that many parents were afraid of sending their children into school, Adams's response was that they should, "fear not sending them back. The stats are clear, the safest place for children is inside a school. They lost almost two years of education. We can't do it again."

Adams repeated the threadbare lie of his predecessor, Bill de Blasio, who claimed that schools are safe because in-school testing shows a low positivity rate. As every educator knows, the once weekly testing of 10 percent of children is a farce.

The claim that students lost two years of education because of remote learning is another lie of the Democratic Party, adapted from the far right. While there were numerous difficulties after March 2020 when schools switched to remote learning—chiefly because of poor funding, the lack of equipment and the disorganization of the political establishment—tens of thousands of educators devoted themselves to ensuring their students received a quality education.

Adams & Co. are not concerned about the academic, emotional and nutritional needs of children. He is committed to the same pro-business policies that have made New York City home to more than 100 billionaires, while the vast majority of New Yorkers struggle from paycheck to paycheck and 22 percent of the city's children—and 37 percent in the Bronx—live in poverty.

Meanwhile, Governor Kathy Hochul is repeating the absurdities of the far right by denying that children are being hospitalized due to COVID-19. "Is that person going to the hospital because of COVID, or did they show up there and are routinely tested and showing positive and they may have been asymptomatic or even just had the sniffles?" she asked.

In this, Hochul is only echoing the talking points of the Biden administration, which has abandoned any effort to stop the transmission of the virus and adopted Trump's "herd immunity" policy. This is the meaning of the CDC's decision to reduce the quarantining periods from 10 days to five, a measure demanded by the airlines and other businesses to force sick workers back on the job so they can produce profit.

The opening of schools would not be possible without the connivance of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). Just as he did with De Blasio, UFT President Michael Mulgrew has closely collaborated with the incoming Adams administration to reopen the schools, ignoring the calls by rank-and-file educators for a strike or any sort of job action to close unsafe schools.

The opposition factions in the UFT offer teachers no way forward. On the contrary, while offering verbal support for sickouts and other protests by educators, the Movement of Rank-and-Files Educator (MORE) insists that teachers must look to the UFT and bow to its authority. But the UFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, and AFT affiliates in Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and other cities, have played the key role in herding educators and students back into infected schools.

Opposed to the independent mobilization of teachers and other workers across the city against the corporatist unions and the corporate-controlled Democratic Party, MORE promotes the debilitating and demoralizing perspective of petitioning Mayor Adams, the Department of Education, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and Mulgrew, to close schools and provide a "remote option." Many of the leading figures in MORE are supporters of the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of Biden's Democratic Party.

To save lives, educators must take matters into their own hands. The

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee (NYC-ERFSC) calls on educators to build rank-and-file safety committees in every building and district, democratically run by workers themselves. Every action of these committees must be guided not by what is good for big business, but what is necessary to save lives and prevent the lifelong debilitation of children.

We urge educators to fight for the following demands:

- The immediate closing of school buildings until the rank-and-file committees, with the advice of scientists, determine that it is safe to return.
- The implementation of high-quality remote education.
- Financial support for parents who must stay home with their children.
- Financial support for small businesses that are forced to close because of the pandemic.
- A program of mass vaccination, including of children.
- A program of mass, high quality testing including the establishment of thousands of testing centers throughout the city.
- A program of rigorous contact tracing and quarantining for at least 14 days of symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals.
- Mandatory masking with KN95-grade masks in all public places. The masks are to be provided free of charge to workers.
- A science education program directed at the working class conducted with the assistance of scientists and physicians.
- A direct appeal to transit, health care, logistics, service and other workers to form their own committees and implement safety standards at their workplaces. Joint action should be taken to shut schools and non-essential businesses until COVID-19 transmission is close to zero.
- An appeal to university staff and students for developing action committees to close their institutions until they are safe. These workers and students must be brought into the rank-and-file safety movement of the whole working class.
- A tax on the city's 103 billionaires to pay for the needs of parents, educators and other workers impacted by the pandemic.
- Holding meetings with and collaborating as closely as possible with rank-and-file committees of workers around the world. The elimination COVID-19 is a global task of the whole international working class.
- Those who agree with this program should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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