

Teachers in San Francisco and Oakland organize wildcat sickouts

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Join the meeting of West Coast rank-and-file educator safety committees this Sunday at 12 noon PST—Register here

Teachers in San Francisco and Oakland, California are organizing wildcat sickouts Thursday and Friday to save lives in the face of mass infections.

The walkouts in California are only the latest in a growing wave of resistance by teachers to the resumption of in-person learning while the Omicron variant is producing record levels of infections. On Monday, teachers in Chicago voted to shift to distance learning, to which the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot responded with a lockout of teachers.

Teachers in Oakland and San Francisco returned from break on Monday to record infections and soaring hospitalizations from the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. Faced with district indifference to student infections and inaction by the teacher unions, teachers have started taking matters into their own hands.

Several hundred San Francisco teachers signed an online petition calling for walkouts on Thursday in order to demand a pause to in-person instruction, as well as N95 masks and paid COVID leave. The walkouts occurred Thursday after mass illness already disrupted instruction. Six hundred teachers were out sick in San Francisco on Tuesday, but rather than close school sites to protect students, the district sent central office staff in as substitute teachers. In Oakland, teachers have raised similar demands, adding opposition to budget cuts, and are planning a walkout on Friday. The districts together serve just over 90,000 students.

Like most of the country, infections in California have reached unprecedented heights. Over the past week, daily new cases have nearly tripled in San

Francisco and quadrupled in Alameda County, where Oakland is located, shattering previous records. Test positivity has also skyrocketed from less than 2 percent a month ago to 17 percent, meaning that many cases are going undetected. Despite the media fiction that the Omicron variant is “mild,” hospitalizations also doubled in both counties over the past week, and the statewide pediatric hospitalization rate is at an all-time high, nearly double last year’s peak.

The situation is so bad that in nearby West Contra Costa School District (32,000 students), the superintendent announced Wednesday that in-person instruction would halt for a long four-day weekend to curb the large number of infections brought back from the holidays.

In the face of the Omicron crisis, the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) and Oakland Education Association (OEA) have tried to limit teachers to begging the districts to “bargain in good faith.” However, the political establishment has made it absolutely clear that, as far as it is concerned, there is nothing to negotiate about—It is determined to reopen schools across the country, no matter the cost in infections and deaths, as a critical element in its drive to keep parents on the job producing record profits for Wall Street.

Both Democratic Party politicians and the corporate media have responded to the actions by teachers with a vicious smear campaign. The *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, ran an editorial yesterday demanding that the Democrats take action to halt the growing wave of teacher resistance.

The head of the White House COVID-19 response team, Jeffrey Zients, recently declared, “The President couldn’t be clearer—schools in this country should remain open.” As part of a broader policy of mass

infection, the Biden administration has reduced isolation time for those infected with COVID, and sought to reduce the daily reporting of new cases.

The teacher unions want to direct teachers' attention towards fruitless bargaining through which the unions will work out a framework to keep schools open with, at most, meaningless fig leaf measures which will do nothing to prevent mass infections. They have, in fact, supported the reopening of schools and played a critical role in reopening them and keeping them open over the course of the last year. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten spent the summer touring the country in support of in-person instruction and even sponsored a town hall meeting with the fascist parent group Open Schools USA which calls for an end to all safety measures, including masks and vaccines for children.

The fact that these actions have been organized by teachers themselves, and not by the unions, is a highly significant step forward for teachers. They must take the next step and formalize the independence of these actions from the unions, and coordinate and expand their opposition, through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. To unite with teachers and workers throughout the region and around the country, these school and district committees should affiliate with the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, founded last year by teachers in the fight against school reopenings. Teachers in New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and across the world have also founded rank-and-file safety committees and are rallying students, families, and other workers in the fight to put lives over profits and end the pandemic.

The fight to save student lives requires a broad mobilization of the working class to shut down schools and workplaces and fight against the policy of mass infection.



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