

Teachers and students denounce nightmarish conditions as Omicron rips through US schools and colleges

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Across the United States, the reopening of schools this week following winter break has been an unmitigated disaster. Despite the fact that daily new cases of COVID-19 have broken records throughout the past weeks as the highly transmissible Omicron variant rips through society, the entire political establishment has maintained the reckless reopening policy of reopening all schools and workplaces in order to maximize corporate profits.

In response to this brutal “herd immunity” strategy, educators are leading a resurgence of the class struggle to stop the pandemic and save lives. Teachers staged walkouts this week in Chicago, Oakland, and San Francisco, to fight for a switch to fully remote learning in order to stop viral transmission. In Chicago, Democratic Party Mayor Lori Lightfoot has effectively locked teachers out of the classroom by prohibiting teachers from providing any kind of remote instruction to their students.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, teachers in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), held mass wildcat sickouts this week. At least 500 teachers did not teach Friday, about 20 percent of the workforce, forcing the closure of 12 schools in the district. In San Francisco, almost 900 teachers and teaching assistants were absent, 20 percent of the workforce.

Teachers in Oakland are being joined by a growing number of students—more than 175 as of this writing—who are circulating a petition that demands an end to in-person learning under present conditions. The petition states in part:

OUSD students are not comfortable with going to school with the rising cases of COVID-19. There's a lot of concerns regarding safety measures and how to protect us from COVID-19, especially the highly contagious Omicron variant. We must go back to distance learning until the cases go down again. In order to ensure a safe learning environment, we demand you give us N95 masks and weekly PCR testing. If these demands are not met we will be striking by not attending school. We will be striking until we get what we need to be safe.

Educators and students are taking a courageous stand against the

disaster unfolding across the country. On Friday, nationwide hospitalizations for COVID-19 surged to over 130,000 people, just 2,000 shy of the all-time high reached one year ago on January 6, 2021.

Schools are one of the most important ways the virus is spreading. Contact tracing data from the State of Illinois, for example, shows that 44.1 percent of all infections came from school settings, more than ten times any other type of location. In Los Angeles, the test positivity rate for teachers and students reached a record 13.5 percent, ten times the rate prior to winter break.

Colleges along the West Coast have also begun reporting mass COVID-19 outbreaks. Stanford University had 700 students and staff test positive for the virus in the last week alone. UC Berkeley, which saw a jump in its test positivity rate to 5 percent, reluctantly decided Friday night to allow for one to two weeks of digital instruction for some courses. This switch only took place amid growing anger among students, particularly a viral post by a member of the student government denouncing the plan to return to classrooms.

In New York City, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams refused to close schools Friday despite mass COVID-19 outbreaks and a major snow storm that normally would have caused a snow day. In defiance of the mayor and the Democratic Party establishment, a staggering 44.5 percent of school children did not go to school Friday. One New York City school worker, Melissa, wrote on Twitter, “There’s schools that have no kitchen staff so the teachers are taking turns making lunch!”

Expressing the widespread anger among students to the unsafe reopening of New York City schools, a Reddit post by a high school student was shared tens of thousands of times on social media. The student described a scene of total breakdown at their high school, writing:

- First period, not enough healthy teachers to teach, students are crammed into an auditorium “super spreader event,” with multiple classes sitting next to each other on stage.

- Second period, teacher is sick. They write, “There was functionally no learning occurring within study hall, and health conditions were safer outside of the auditorium. It was well beyond max capacity.

- Third period, first normal period. Students are given Covid

tests, but the school has begun to run low and has to ration the tests.

The student then noted:

90% of the bathrooms were full of students swabbing their noses and taking their tests. I had one kid ask me—with his mask down, by the way—whether a “faint line was positive: proceeding to show me his positive COVID test. I told him to go to the nurse. One student tested positive IN THE AUDITORIUM, and a few students started screaming and ran away from him. There was now a lack of available seats given there was a COVID-positive student within the middle of the auditorium. They’re now planning on having teachers give up their free periods to act as substitute teachers because the auditorium is simply not safe enough.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a teacher in San Francisco who participated in the sickout and wished to remain anonymous. They stated, “We have no mandatory testing, and they have made it really difficult to get tested. Each school site has weekly ‘recommended’ testing available once per week, so if you get sick with symptoms on a Tuesday and want to test but your school site tests on a Friday you have to travel to another school in a district after school and somehow get there before they close. Many educators use public transportation through the city as well, which makes this a huge issue.”

The teacher described the inadequacy of in-class protection as well, commenting, “Teachers don’t have good masks, and students are able to eat in classrooms. We have a program called Breakfast in the Classroom, which is a great program that provides meals for students, but the kids eat their breakfast in class without a mask.”

The teacher added, “Here in San Francisco we have older buildings and small classrooms. Social distancing doesn’t exist, and kids are often shoulder to shoulder. We have had a lot of teachers leave this year which has increased class sizes for everyone. ‘Ventilation’ in our schools means to open a window.”

Both in Oakland and in San Francisco, the respective teachers’ unions have vowed only to negotiate with the school districts for better masks and PPE. However, neither have called for a return to remote education as the virus rips through schools. The Oakland Education Association (OEA) has not even mentioned the teachers’ sickout action publicly, let alone voiced support for it.

Regardless of whatever watered-down measures result from such discussions, the pandemic is raging *now* and these measures will not hold back the tide of illness. Millions of infections will occur across the country in the next few days, with schools a hotbed of disease.

On Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that there was now a record number of pediatric hospitalizations from COVID-19. What will be the result of letting every child in the US become infected with Omicron?

In the face of mass spread, the union’s pretension that

negotiating with school districts over two weeks for meager increases to PPE amounts to a solution to this crisis is despicable. Schools need to be shut now as part of emergency action taken by workers to end the pandemic.

Only through the independent initiative of educators, parents and students, united with the broader working class, will a movement develop that is capable of stopping the pandemic. In Chicago, Northern California, New York City, as well as Michigan, Texas, Los Angeles, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and a growing number of cities and states across the US, educators have formed rank-and-file committees to take up this struggle.

The San Francisco teacher noted that in response to their sickout, the district has already begun threatening teachers with termination and disciplinary action if their absence was not filed correctly. COVID-19 sick leave also expired December 31 in their district. The teacher described the pressures many teachers face in not wanting to use traditional sick leave, as educators now have to pay out of pocket for a substitute teacher.

The WSWS also spoke to a teacher in North Carolina. She stated, “The situation is extremely tense. For immunocompromised teachers like me, it’s absolutely frightening. The risk before omicron was manageable with an effective vaccine. Studies show that breakthrough hospitalizations are primarily immunocompromised people. No, I likely wouldn’t die (being vaxxed to the max), but omicron opens many serious health issues that could damage me irreparably.”

“I support the Chicago and California teachers because 1/4 of adults have high risk category health issues. Are we supposed to say ‘forget you’ to these teachers, like me, who have years in our jobs, retirement in the line? We are teachers who have worked our whole lives, sacrificed for our students, spent thousands of our salaries on our students and now we are being told—you don’t matter.”



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