“The teachers are with us, and we have their backs”: 1,000 K-12 students in New York City walk out to protest unsafe reopening of schools

John Conrad
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school and to get involved in the fight against unsafe school reopenings!

On Tuesday, nearly 1,000 students at over 30 K-12 schools in New York City participated in a walkout to protest the unsafe reopening of the largest school district in the United States, amid a surge of the highly infectious and deadly Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The reopening of schools is being led by the new mayor of New York City, Democrat Eric Adams.

The protest of high school and middle school youth is part of a broader and deepening fight by students, educators and parents calling for the closure of schools. Protests are taking shape in Oakland, California; Portland, Oregon; Boston, Massachusetts; and perhaps most significantly, Chicago, Illinois, where the teachers union is maneuvering to force teachers back to in-person learning despite overwhelming opposition.

The New York City walkout was organized by high school students at Stuyvesant High School and Brooklyn Technical High School, who formed the group “NYC Student Walkout for COVID Safety” to organize their fellow students.

The action has received support from students, educators, parents and workers in New York City and beyond. Since its inception, NYC Student Walkout for COVID Safety has garnered thousands of followers across social media platforms, with an Instagram post announcing the walkout receiving well over 16,000 likes.

In the end, it is estimated that close to a thousand students at dozens of elementary, middle and high schools across the city’s five boroughs walked out of classrooms around noon yesterday, joined by parents and some educators. At Brooklyn Technical High School, the largest high school in the country, over 400 students participated in the protest action.

Theo, an eighth-grade student from Manhattan who led a walkout at his school, spoke to the WSWS about why he and other students were protesting the school reopening policy.

“I saw Mayor Adams and the New York City government treating us like our life had no meaning! Enough was enough.” Theo then sent a tweet supporting a walkout. “After the tweet I found myself speaking not only to students,” he said, “but also teachers and parents that felt just as strongly as I did. Seeing the quantity of people walking out I think it’s fair to say that they resonate with my cause: the New York City government needs to take us seriously.”

Asked about the conditions in his school, Theo said, “We have new kids with COVID every day. Some don’t keep their masks on. Teachers have a ridiculous amount of responsibility without help from administrators. I have spoken to countless teachers. They are with us, and we have their backs.”

“The majority of students I know don’t want our school to open,” he continued. “But to be clear we are not saying to not open our schools. We’re saying to restore a remote option so that those that want to can learn/teach remote.” Theo added that we must “listen to the scientists and implement their ideas on a large scale.”

Four Stuyvesant High School students who participated in the walkout spoke with a reporter from the WSWS outside their school.

Brehami said, “Schools should be shut down to bring the cases down until we have a better solution to the new variants.” He emphasized the danger that people can still transmit the virus even if they are vaccinated.

“All the government is focusing on right now is the money, they’re not focusing on the well-being of their citizens.”

Another student, John, whose parents both have medical conditions that make them high-risk individuals, said, “Given how contagious this new Omicron variant is, I feel like it was a really poor decision on the mayor and on the DOE’s [Department of Education’s] part to keep the schools open. I honestly don’t understand what the point of it was.”

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"Especially at our school— Stuyvesant—we've had about 500 kids go absent because they've either caught it or someone else has caught it and they needed to quarantine. We're being forced to come to school in such an obviously dangerous position—at this point, we don't know who has the virus, I could have it, my friend could have it, anyone could have it. So the best decision right now is to go remote.

"We should prioritize the safety of the students and our families first because, otherwise, what else do we have?"

Asked whether he thought schools are being seen as daycare by the ruling class, so that parents can go to work, John replied, "Absolutely."

A third student, Allan, said, "The fact that Eric Adams said that school is the safest place for children, it's kind of absurd. We have the resources to do online school. It's just the mayor doesn't want to do it." He raised the need for a temporary lockdown that would be a few months, "but that two or three months is worth it in order to keep the people of New York City safe."

Our reporter raised the need for their walkout to be widely expanded and link up with other struggles by students, educators and workers throughout the country and around the world. The role of the Democratic Party in New York City and Chicago was also brought up.

Brehami replied, "I 100 percent agree with what you just said about it. Usually, I don't like to go into politics with Democrats or Republicans, but I do feel like the responsibility does fall on the entirety of the American government and their failure to protect its citizens."

Mitchum added, "They don't know how it is for ordinary Americans to live through COVID right now. A lot of Americans don't have the money and got laid off, lost their jobs, aren't able to go to school; a lot of families have to take care of kids at home. Politicians in Washington don't have to worry about that. They have the means and the money to actually live through COVID."

Contrary to the claims of capitalist politicians and the media, the Omicron variant has proven to be anything but "mild." Yesterday, over one million Americans reportedly contracted the virus, and close to 2,000 people died from COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands of people across the US are being hospitalized every day, putting immense strain on the rapidly decaying health care system.

New York City is once again one of the global epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the weekend, 100,000 new cases and 200 deaths were reported, with at least 35,371 infections and 23 deaths on Monday. The city's hospitalization rate has risen by over 73 percent, with the number of young children hospitalized due to COVID-19 quadrupling.

Of the over 35,000 infections on Monday, the city has reported that 11,825 were K-12 students and 2, 298 were school staff. These numbers are undoubtedly undercounts of the true outbreaks in New York City schools. It is widely acknowledged that city testing and tracing programs, like similar programs in cities and states across the country, are entirely inadequate at accurately assessing the spread of the virus.

Schools have been proven to be main vectors for the spread of the coronavirus. Last week, the American Academy of Pediatrics recorded 580,247 pediatric COVID-19 cases, up 74 percent from the previous week's record 325,000 cases, and a record 1,636 pediatric hospitalizations and 14 additional child deaths.

These numbers only further stress the need for an immediate closure of schools and transition to online instruction. However, despite the ever-growing crisis, Mayor Eric Adams, following the lead of the Biden administration, is pushing ahead with and expanding the homicidal reopening policies of the previous administration. Adams has repeatedly lied about the danger of the virus and is making it clear that the priority of the new Democratic administration is not public health, but "keeping our economy operating."

However, as the protests in New York and beyond are demonstrating, students and teachers have different priorities. "Our school conditions are not safe right now... there's so many people sick & our mayor is not doing enough to protect us," said Felicia, a high school student in the Bronx, in a video testimonial on Twitter.

The lies promoted by the ruling class, its politicians and media, that the public must "learn to live with the virus," are disproven by the actual science. However, the ending of the pandemic requires, in addition to the immediate closure of schools and non-essential workplaces, a broader strategy to eliminate and eradicate the virus. The implementation of this science-based strategy can only come through the political mobilization of students, youth, teachers, and the entire working class against the rotten social, political and economic system that is the fundamental cause of the current crisis—capitalism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality encourage youth and teachers to get in touch with us today to share the conditions in your school and learn more about joining the developing opposition of teachers and students around the country.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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