

Opposition by educators and students to in-person classes mounts as COVID-19 infections surge across US

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The past two weeks since K-12 schools reopened across the US have proven to be an unprecedented disaster for working families amid the ongoing Omicron surge. Millions of staff and students have been infected, resulting in forced school closures and an explosion of opposition from educators, students and parents to unsafe schools.

Despite repeated claims by the political establishment and corporate media that “schools are safe,” infections among children have skyrocketed to record levels since schools reopened after the holiday break. According to the latest American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) child COVID-19 report, more than 905,587 children ages 0-17 have contracted the virus since January 3. Pediatric hospitalizations continue to surge with the latest daily average at 870 per day. Based on the official reports from the CDC, a staggering 50 children have died from COVID-19 since January 4.

Given the lack of systematic testing, contact tracing and reporting throughout the country, these numbers are undoubtedly far higher. Mass infection among students and staff has forced thousands of school closures across the country in recent weeks. According to the burbio.com School Closings Tracker, at least 9,641 schools have closed temporarily since January 3 due to staffing shortages.

Minneapolis Public Schools, the third largest K-12 school district in Minnesota, will be switching to online learning starting Friday for a two-week period due to severe staffing shortages. There have been at least 13 schools in the district that have reported school outbreaks within the past two weeks.

Cases have also skyrocketed in Rhode Island public schools. During a Wednesday night meeting of the Rhode Island Department of Education, most teachers and

parents who spoke during public comment called for schools to go remote.

During public comment, Stephanie, a teacher in Central Falls, Rhode Island, explained the level of spread at her school noting, “We were forced to emergency dismiss students on Thursday morning because we undeniably had internal spread. An entire kindergarten class, 100 percent of students tested positive, four out of six kindergarten teachers were positive. We had N-95s, my school has air purifiers in every classroom, we have most students eating lunch in classrooms to avoid crowded cafeteria spaces ... COVID still spread in our school.” Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green rejected pleas to close the schools, claiming they were the “safest place to learn.”

Showcasing the level of opposition to in-person schooling amid the current surge, a recently conducted poll indicates the majority of US adults support remote learning, including 63 percent of those with an income less than \$50,000.

In Oakland, California, hundreds of teachers and thousands of students engaged in wildcat sickout action on Thursday in opposition to the lack of safety mitigations in schools and the high level of spread on campuses. Teachers and students in at least 16 school sites in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) participated in the sickout with at least two schools having the entire teaching and student populations refusing to go in person.

Demonstrating its contempt for educators and students alike, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) recently voted against any option for remote learning and reached a backdoor agreement with the district to keep open the schools. The agreement is in direct opposition to the most militant demands of teachers calling for temporary closures and higher mitigation measures. With anger

erupting from rank-and-file educators, the entire OEA safety bargaining team, comprised of 20 OUSD teachers, resigned from their positions in the union Wednesday.

On Thursday during the sickout, representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) attended an online meeting held by Oakland high school students who are calling for a strike starting January 18 in opposition to unsafe schools. Students voiced how they tried to attend an OUSD school board meeting Wednesday but were silenced and sidelined by the school administrators who made them wait more than five hours to speak. The IYSSE representative encouraged students to see their struggle in an international context, pointing to the recent strike of educators, school employees and school nurses in France and invited them to attend a Sunday meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

Hundreds of high school students in Round Rock, Texas, have issued a petition calling for better COVID-19 safety protocols in the Round Rock Independent School District and are calling for a remote option if their demands are not met. The petition notes the present unsafe conditions and students' demands include district-wide contact tracing, an enforced mask mandate, KN95/N95 masks for every student, Rapid or PCR tests every two weeks for everyone on campus, and outdoor spaces to eat, even when it rains. Students are planning a walkout to show the level of opposition at each school site.

Chicago students have planned to walk out of classes Friday in opposition to unsafe schools. The walkout comes after the recent betrayal of the Chicago Teachers Union to stop the collective action by 25,000 educators and force them back into unsafe conditions. Many teachers returned to schools Thursday amid high community transmission and without increased safety.

Thousands of New York City Public Schools students walked out of classes Tuesday, effectively shutting down dozens of school sites for the day to showcase their opposition to unsafe schools. High school students in Portland, Oregon issued an open letter and in Boston, Massachusetts, students circulated a petition demanding remote learning and higher safety in schools.

During a Tuesday interview on NPR's "Here and Now," U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona reiterated the lie that schools are the "safest place for children." In response to the severe staffing shortages taking place around the country as a result of mass infection Cardona said, "we, through the American

Rescue Plan, provided \$130 billion across the US and have emphasized that those funds can be used to address these staffing shortages. ... But I am pleased that the new CDC guidelines limits the quarantining time to five days which will help keep our schools staffed by the educators and give our students the best chance to learn in person."

The corporate and political establishment could not care less about the academic and emotional well-being of children. As a result of their criminal response to the pandemic, more than 167,000 children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19.

The real reason schools are being kept open is to keep parents at work producing more profit. Far from opposing the further spread of COVID-19, the Biden administration is actively carrying out a policy of mass infection.

The growing opposition among educators and students must become part of an international movement of workers and youth to close schools and nonessential workplaces as part of a global strategy to eliminate the virus. These policies will not be carried out by capitalist governments across the world. Such a fight can only be waged through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to carry out these demands.

All educators, students and staff engaged in the struggle to end in-person learning and who want to join this ongoing movement of the working class should get involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality or sign up to build an Educators Rank-and-File Committee at your school site.



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