

Close schools to eliminate the virus! Why the OUSD tentative agreement will not stop COVID-19

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On Tuesday night, Oakland student leaders announced a pause to their strike demanding virtual instruction unless the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) could be made safe. On their social media pages, the strike leaders announced their support for a tentative agreement reached by the Oakland Educators Association (OEA) and the OUSD. The leaders stated that their demands had been met by the district and urged teachers to vote yes on the agreement.

Students and teachers must be warned: The tentative agreement reached by the OEA and OUSD will not stop the spread of COVID-19, and, in particular, the highly infectious Omicron variant. N95 masks, weekly testing and outdoor eating structures—the three demands of students—are insufficient to stop continued infection and save lives.

COVID-19 is an airborne virus that lingers in the air for hours. Talking and other vocal activity, for a sustained period of time in an enclosed area like a classroom, virtually ensures infection with a contagious individual present. N95 masks, when properly fitted and worn, can reduce the rate of infection, but even in the most ideal cases they are not bulletproof, especially with prolonged contact in an enclosed space. Given that masks are frequently not fitted or worn properly, let alone in school settings, this further reduces their effectiveness at stopping mass spread.

Volunteer weekly testing, if it is actually offered consistently, is also entirely insufficient to halt viral transmission. An infectious student who comes to a class on Monday would have ample time to infect dozens of people before being tested on a Friday. Moreover, OUSD, following local Alameda County regulations, no longer quarantines classrooms that have had an infected student.

The Oakland student strike is just one manifestation of

a global rebellion by students and teachers to the dangerous learning conditions forced upon them. Capitalist governments across the world, particularly in the United States and Europe, have in the face of Omicron abandoned all pretense of trying to mitigate the spread of the virus. The population is effectively being told “you will get sick” and “you must now permanently live with the virus.” This position, which has more than a whiff of eugenics, is being broadcast unquestioningly by all the major corporate media outlets.

The consequences of this policy of deliberate mass infection are unacceptable. It would mean the death of many more individuals, particularly vulnerable, immunocompromised people, and severe long-term health consequences for broad sections of the population.

There is currently no long lasting immunity to SARS-CoV-2. With one-third of the world’s population having had no access to a vaccine and with the rampant spread of the virus globally, it is only a matter of time before new variants develop, further threatening the efficacy of already limited, constantly waning immunity.

Schools are being kept open, and a policy of mass infection advocated, because Wall Street and its representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties will not tolerate any more encroachment on profit making.

Oakland high school students took a courageous stand against these policies of mass infection dictated, ultimately, by corporate interests. However, the fight to stop the spread of the virus and keep children and the community safe cuts across the interest of the school district and the teacher unions, including the OEA, which have all vowed to keep schools in-person.

At every turn, the OEA has sought to stunt opposition and facilitate the reopening of schools. Just last week they issued a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU)

proposing assigning central office administrators to fill in for sick teachers in order to paper over the lack of substitute teachers. No student can learn effectively with a revolving door of emergency substitutes. No teacher can effectively teach with 20 percent or more of the class out sick or in quarantine.

The way forward for high school students, teachers and other workers is to break out of the parochialism of their local struggles and recognize that they are part of a global resistance of the working class to these homicidal policies.

In the US alone, there have been struggles in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, San Francisco, Oakland and Portland to oppose unsafe schools. Globally, opposition has occurred in France, Germany, Australia and Canada in the last two weeks alone. All of these struggles represent attempts to stop the reckless policy of mass infection, but in order to be successful, those participating must realize the necessarily global character of the opposition emerging.

Moreover, students and teachers alike must understand that this struggle is a political battle between classes.

What stands in the way of implementing a rational public health policy is not the epidemiological limits of the situation or the necessary resources but the political and economic interests of the capitalist class, which subordinates all life to the accumulation of vast sums of wealth for a small elite.

Consider the following fact: A new billionaire has been created every 26 hours since the pandemic began. The world's 10 richest men have doubled their fortunes, while over 160 million people are projected to have been pushed into poverty. Meanwhile, an estimated 17 million people have died from COVID-19—a scale of loss not seen since the Second World War. The financial oligarchy has piled up unimaginable fortunes amidst mass death. Indeed, the more people die, the higher the stock market soars.

The Democrats and Republicans, big business and the corporate-controlled media insist that the policies necessary to end the pandemic are impossible to implement. The truth is that they are achievable; the resources do exist. For example, China, with its massive population, has been able to reduce COVID-19 deaths to nearly zero last year due to its flexible Zero COVID policy.

The implementation of the necessary policies and the allocation of the resources, however, are incompatible with the existing capitalist system. Capitalism can offer no solution to a crisis that threatens the lives and well-

being of the vast majority of the population. The only “solution” offered by capitalism is one of mass death and long-term illness.

The IYSSE, in conjunction with the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, calls on teachers and students to vote no to the tentative agreement and in doing so to take up the fight for a different solution: the elimination of the virus. The policies implemented to stop viral transmission must be determined by the needs of public health. The protection of human life and safety must take absolute and unconditional priority over all corporate-financial interests.

In order for the necessary change to come about, appeals must be made, not to this or that ruling class politician or trade union bureaucrat, who are tied by a thousand threads to the capitalist system, but to workers across all industries to build a united movement of the working class against the pandemic and against the capitalist system.

Most importantly, we urge those looking to fight for safe schools to form rank-and-file safety committees at your school site or workplace. On Sunday, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees will meet at noon to explain further the science of elimination and the need to shut schools until they can be made safe. We urge you to attend this meeting and get in touch with us today.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) also encourages high school youth to contact us to organize opposition to the deadly school reopening.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact