

Nearly 1,500 West Contra Costa, California, educators support strike action to stop the spread of COVID-19

Hong Jian, Evan Winters
29 January 2022

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees is meeting at 12:00 Noon Pacific Time this Sunday to organize educators, students and parents in order to temporarily close schools as part of a broader strategy to stop the pandemic. Register today to attend this weekend's meeting!

Nearly 1,500 teachers, nurses and other school staff in the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) in the San Francisco Bay Area of California could begin strike action over COVID-19 safety in the coming days. Last weekend, a poll conducted by the United Teachers of Richmond (UTR) of its members found that 72 percent supported the action.

The UTR has advanced a series of limited demands, stating that if these were not met that they would request a strike authorization vote on Friday, January 28. As of this writing, there have been no reports on whether a vote has taken place.

The resounding support for a strike shown by last weekend's poll is the latest indication of the growing rebellion by educators and students against the "herd immunity" strategy of mass infection now adopted by the Democratic Party, from the Biden administration down to the state and local levels.

As in much of California and the rest of the country, educators report nearly empty classrooms as parents keep their children at home either due to COVID-19 exposure or infection or as a protective measure against the rapidly spreading disease. The hostility of educators, supported by parents and students, to the government-sanctioned push to keep schools open under these conditions, will not be addressed by the half-measures proposed by the UTR.

The UTR, which covers educators serving 27,000 students in the cities of Richmond, El Cerrito, Hercules, Pinole, and San Pablo, is following the example of the Oakland Education Association (OEA) in nearby Oakland, which reached a tentative agreement this week to unsafely reopen

schools and influenced the decision of students to end their week-long walkout.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 10 percent of the population of Contra Costa County (or 170,123 people) have officially contracted COVID-19, resulting in 1,101 documented deaths. The county reports 28,362 cases in the past two weeks alone, coinciding with the reopening of schools amid the Omicron surge.

The UTR is now announcing the same completely inadequate demands the OEA settled on with OUSD. The union has posted no information about the strike on its website, but according to the East Bay Times, its demands are:

- High-quality masks provided daily to teachers
- Weekly voluntary COVID-19 testing for all
- A qualified adult in every classroom
- A choice between twice weekly testing or remote learning for classrooms with 3 or more cases

Throughout the past week, the UTR has been encouraging teachers to work to rule in an effort to pressure WCCUSD to agree to their demands. None of these demands will prevent continued mass infection of students and educators with COVID-19. The virus spreads through aerosols, which can remain suspended in the air for hours and easily travel the length of a classroom.

There are also apparently no demands related to ventilation or air filtration, which are critical preventive measures to slow transmission. Having a qualified adult in every classroom will do nothing to stop the spread between students and teachers in classrooms.

The KN95 masks, which the union is requesting, block only 95 percent of aerosolized particles at 0.3 microns, meaning that infection is still possible even if the mask is sized and worn correctly, and KN95 masks are more often counterfeit than N95 masks. At best, such masks will slow the rate of infection. Reusable elastomeric respirators offering 99.97 percent protection are not even discussed by

the union.

The form of voluntary testing is left ambiguous in the union's demands. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing is highly accurate, but results often take days or longer to arrive from backlogged laboratories. By the time an educator or student learns he or she is positive, tens or hundreds of people will have likely been exposed to the virus. Rapid antigen tests produce results more quickly but are more prone to false negative results, particularly with the Omicron variant, allowing asymptomatic COVID-19-positive individuals to unknowingly spread the virus.

The last demand, added on Wednesday, makes clear that these demands have nothing to do with trying to make schools safe. According to the Contra Costa Health Services regulations, an unvaccinated worker who comes into contact with someone who has COVID-19 is supposed to quarantine for at least five days and test negative on the fifth day before returning to work. Yet UTR only demands twice a week testing for students (most of whom are still unvaccinated), who come into contact with at least three other infected students in the same classroom.

Completely absent is the only demand that would actually keep educators and students safe from a virus that has killed nearly 900,000 in the US alone: Remote learning.

There is no lack of resolve by workers to fight for safe working conditions or for better pay for that matter. The completely inadequate nature of the union's demands is rooted in its intimate connections to the Democratic Party. The Biden and Newsom administrations have made clear that schools must remain open so parents can return to work, no matter the state of the pandemic.

California's Democrat-led state government has gone so far as to tie school funding to in-person instruction, which has severely curtailed safe remote learning options.

The fight for remote learning is an essential component of a public health strategy aimed at placing lives before profit: Global elimination of COVID-19.

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (WCERFSC) fight for this perspective, calling on educators across the West Coast to unite with their brothers and sisters in health care, logistics and other industries based on the following demands:

- The immediate closing of school buildings until teachers themselves, on the advice of trusted scientists, determine that it is safe to return
- The implementation of fully funded, high-quality remote education
- Financial support for all workers and small business people affected by temporary lockdowns
- A program of mass testing and contact tracing, including of children, with thousands of testing and vaccination

centers set up throughout every major city

- A reversal of the CDC's shortening of its quarantine guidelines. Those infected or exposed must quarantine for at least 14 days, with full compensation made for missed work

- Mandatory masking with N95 grade or better masks to be provided free of charge in all public places

- A science education program directed at the working class, conducted with the assistance of scientists and physicians, to popularize understanding of airborne transmission and all other science related to the pandemic

- The installation of the highest quality HVAC and air filtration systems in every school

- A tax on the West Coast's 189 billionaires to pay for the needs of parents, educators and other workers impacted by the pandemic

The UTR is aiming to repeat the union betrayals that have transpired in Oakland, Chicago and elsewhere, in support of the bipartisan eugenicist policy of "living with the virus." Teachers, students and workers know that such a policy actually means many workers and their loved ones will die with the virus. It means living with Long COVID or caring for a family member with this affliction. The only safe option for students and teachers is a return to remote learning, and the only way forward in that struggle is through the organization of the broadest possible layers of workers, students and parents into democratically controlled rank-and-file committees.

For this reason, we call on educators and students in Richmond and throughout Contra Costa County to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and in opposition to the unions and the Democratic Party. We urge all who agree with this perspective to attend this weekend's meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees at 12:00 Noon Pacific Time this Sunday.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact