

"My job was like a dystopian nightmare"

Brooklyn teacher speaks out after year of COVID and budget cuts

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New York educators who want to speak up about the budget cuts made by the Democratic Party Administration of Eric Adams should contact the WSWS.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a public meeting on Saturday August 27 to put forward a program for teachers to wage a unified struggle against another school year of mass infection, death and austerity. Register now.

As the pandemic continues to surge throughout the US, schools are once again becoming centers for community transmission as they reopen for the fall semester. New York City Public Schools, the largest school district in the US, serving nearly 1 million students, is set to reopen in the coming weeks. Throughout the course of the pandemic, all COVID mitigations have been systematically dismantled by the administration of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and by that of his successor after January 2022, Democrat Eric Adams.

Last April, Adams abolished mask mandates for all children. This fall, even limited testing of students will cease.

The summer has seen positivity rates for COVID-19 of 15 percent or more, almost certainly an undercount given the fact that over-the-counter tests are seldom recorded. Children in summer school continue to get sick from the disease. The city has declared a public health emergency for monkeypox—but provided little public information on the course of the disease or its modes of transmission. This now adds another layer of danger to children when they resume instruction in less than a month.

Further, public schools suffer from an acute shortage of educators and the Democratic-dominated City Council voted in Eric Adams' budget cuts of \$215 million or more, leading many schools to "excess" educators and shut down programs. While the cuts have been stayed by a court order that the city is appealing, it seems certain that schools will have even fewer educators in the fall, and that budgets will be slashed in the next years.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Sade, a teacher at a Brooklyn middle school, about her experiences as an educator last year. Sade is a member of the Northeast Rank-and-File Educators Safety Committee and has taken a leading role in organizing a COVID information network at her school.

Sade reflected on the untenable conditions in her district this past school year and the dangers posed to teachers in the upcoming school year that starts on September 6.

"When the schools first shut down [in March 2020], it was really kind of abrupt. We were totally unprepared. The only kind of training we got was this crash course in using Google Classroom, setting up our classes, posting work and teaching us how the students could contact us. There was just a lot of confusion.

"By June 2021, some of the kids talked about feeling isolated but they were rare. In the online synchronous learning we could talk as if it was a real class. Students could talk to each other about the work and things like that. Most of the kids were fine with it and submitted their work and did very well.

"Then [in September 2021] we all just went in and everybody kept on saying, 'Well this isn't going to last, they're going to close as soon as the numbers get high again.' But of course that didn't happen. The numbers rose and we still had to report for work.

"The Omicron experience across the board was awful. My job was like a dystopian nightmare. No information was being shared and the admin was very secretive about what classes and what students were sick.

"I can understand them keeping back information about individual students because of HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] laws, but they wouldn't even tell us which classes had cases and how many cases. All of us needed to know because we had to make decisions about our health.

"I went to the union rep to complain about the secrecy of the administration. He asked if I'd gotten the form letter the school send out. I said 'yes' and he said, 'Well, you've been notified.'

"When it came to testing the staff, they would only take like five people out of 65 employees in the school. Whoever would run down to the testing room the fastest would get a test. One of my colleagues described it as the Hunger Games."

Sade called out the fact that both de Blasio and Adams used the under-testing of students to claim that schools were the "safest place in the city," "a big lie because everybody knew that the number of kids being tested was too low. It was very easy for students to opt out." This resulted in the spread of COVID-19 among students, as she told us.

"Some of my students lost family members or even multiple family members, so they were highly impacted. I know they found it very difficult to be around other students who weren't taking the

pandemic seriously, who didn't understand that people were really dying. One girl had both her grandparents die in one week. I tried to get her in to see a counselor and I did in the end, but it was difficult."

"My biggest worry," Sade added, "was not to die from COVID. I knew I was being exposed to the virus pretty much the whole school year from kids that I'm interacting with every day.

"Everybody I knew at the school that was eligible for retirement retired immediately. In our school there must be close to 10 people out of 65 who retired or quit. I certainly understand that. I have looked into other jobs where my skills as a teacher could be used. Certainly if I find something I will leave here. I know a lot of other teachers feel the same way, but many of them have a lot of years in so they're holding out and trying not to die of COVID or to get shot in the meantime."

The retirements and other educator losses during the pandemic have had an impact on staffing, which has reached critical levels. Sade addressed these issues.

"We had a lot of problems during the year. There wasn't enough money for substitutes and we all had to take on extra coverages for teachers that were out with COVID, and that was another stressful thing. Some days the school pretty much had to warehouse the kids in the auditorium. They would put several classes together with a teacher supervising a lot of kids."

Sade commented on the school budget cuts in New York City. Eric Adams has slated \$215 million to be slashed from the budget, which will result in the shutting down of programs, especially in the arts, and the "excessing" of teachers who will have a paycheck, but must be hired by another school. Parents and teachers took the city to court in an effort to stop the cuts, and a judge issued an injunction staying the cuts, but an appeals court has now overruled the stay and allowed the cuts to go forward.

"We just found out about the cuts at the end of the school year, so we didn't get a chance to talk about it too much. People just couldn't believe it.

"I don't know how the school is going to run, because we barely got through last year with everyone out sick with COVID. What are we going to do this year with fewer teachers and less money? It was already bare bones. I've never even gotten a pen from the DOE [Department of Education].

"We don't have an adequate budget as it is. The school that I teach in is in a very poor area and the kids need a lot of support. They're not getting what they need as it is, and then to cut things further?"

Inflation is having a huge impact on the working class in New York. Sade spoke about having to decide what items to buy at the store because prices have risen so steeply. She added:

"Most of my colleagues don't live in the city because they can't afford it with the low wages we're paid. It's becoming very expensive for them to pay for gas and the cost of the commute is doubling. Everyone is pretty upset."

We asked Sade if and how the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is addressing the impacts of inflation on teachers.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh," she said, "but of course not. I mean maybe if I google, I might find [UFT President] Michael Mulgrew saying something about inflation, but that's a joke. I've

heard him say a lot of things, but nothing changes, and I'm really scared about this new contract coming up. How can it get worse than it is already? I'm sure it's going to get worse because the union does not stand up for us. My coworkers feel the same; we have no one on our side.

"I feel abandoned and tricked by the Democratic Party as well. I mean opening schools is related to getting people back to work. They knew opening schools was just going to result in the death of children and of teachers, but they didn't care. They needed free babysitting for the working class to get back on the job so the corporations could make money.

"The Democratic Party is for the worker in words only. I mean there's a difference between Republicans and Democrats, but it doesn't matter who's in power because neither one of those parties cares about the working class."

Sade has been a member of the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee for just over a year. She has spoken at regional and national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meetings, detailing the horrible conditions in her school. Significantly, Sade developed an online communications network in her school so that staff could inform each other of COVID outbreaks.

"I think it was very helpful to have a committee in my school because we were able to share information with each other, what little we could find out. We shared with each other and helped protect each other by letting each other know what classes had COVID and how many cases. It was the one way that we're able to feel empowered by sharing information and so I think it really helped us survive this past year, figuratively and literally. I am hoping to do much more with the rank-and-file committee."

We asked her thoughts on taking forward the defense of educators and students in the communities in this next year. What is the next step?

"My goal is to get more people involved in their rank-and-file committee," she said, "and to encourage other schools to do the same. The union has shown itself to be too closely aligned with the politicians and with the corporate world. We need our own representation so that we can demand better conditions and better pay.

"We obviously need a socialist party, at least more than just these two parties, and we need a party that is truly for the working class, not one that just gives us lip service."



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