# No to another school year of mass infection, death and austerity!

**Socialist Equality Party (US)**
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*The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (US), which is supported by the Socialist Equality Party (US), is hosting a public meeting at 2pm Eastern this Saturday, August 27, to organize opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools and deepening austerity. Register here and share this statement widely on social media!*

Hundreds of millions of students and educators are returning to classrooms across the United States and internationally amid an unprecedented crisis in public education.

Wave upon wave of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to crash down upon society, taking the lives of educators, parents, students and workers in every industry throughout the world. This is now joined by the rapid spread of monkeypox, also a lethal disease and one that particularly threatens children.

With Wall Street awash with trillions of dollars in profits, there is no reason workers should accept their children being sacrificed any more than they should accept communities being subjected to a mass disabling event.

In the two-and-a-half years of the pandemic, next to nothing has been done to make buildings safer with modern ventilation systems or to supply the necessary well-paid staff to meet the social, learning and mental health needs of young people. Schools, proven to be centers of viral transmission, have not been temporarily closed and the population financially compensated while the pandemic is stopped. Nothing has been done to provide high-quality remote learning and social supports.

To keep workers on the job and corporate returns climbing, the Biden administration demands that school buildings remain open. For its part, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shamefully lent its once good name to the ending of even minimal mitigation measures, replacing mask mandates with mass infection mandates. The same abandonment of all mitigation measures is taking place across Europe and internationally.

Workers are beginning to draw the necessary conclusion that the fight against COVID-19 is primarily political, not simply medical, and requires a struggle against capitalism. Educators, who in their thousands have walked out and resisted being herded into unsafe schools over the past two years, are not alone.

While over 4,000 teachers in Columbus, Ohio initiated a strike on Monday, a general strike is brewing in the United Kingdom. Last month, a mass movement of workers in Sri Lanka brought down former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Across the US, support is building for the powerful campaign of socialist autoworker Will Lehman, who is running for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in order to abolish the billion-dollar union apparatus and restore full power to the hands of rank-and-file workers.

**What is the situation in schools?**

In announcing its latest guidelines, which drop recommendations for quarantining, surveillance testing and contact tracing in most settings, including schools, CDC official Greta Massetti stated, “COVID-19 is here to stay.” This so-called public health agency has embraced the “forever COVID” policy of the Biden administration. Since Biden took office, over 600,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, including thousands of educators, far more than under Trump.

At least 1,750 children have now died from COVID-19, the vast majority during the last school year when schools were forced open during the Delta and Omicron surges. Children who have contracted COVID-19 are at substantially higher risk of blood clots of the lungs, heart inflammation, kidney failure and Type 1 diabetes. A recent study in *Pediatrics* also found that 8 percent of children hospitalized with COVID-19 experienced neurological complications, including seizures and encephalopathy.

Yet officials continue to lie about the dangers of in-person learning during a pandemic. The day the CDC guidelines were released, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha was interviewed by Senator Bernie Sanders. When Sanders stated that children “are not dying of COVID-19,” Jha did not correct him. He instead boasted that his children have attended school in-person, while acknowledging that their elite district is able to provide the best ventilation and air filtration systems money can buy.

The reality for the vast majority of schools in the US is antiquated HVAC systems, crowded classrooms and staff shortages that have led to the common practice of hundreds of kids being crammed into an auditorium. Officials’ crocodile tears over “learning loss” are a charade. As Biden’s advisor Brian Deese stated in January 2021, “We need to get the schools open… so that parents can get back to work.”

Now, in addition to COVID-19, there is the uncontrolled spread of monkeypox. A horrific disease among adults, it has historically been even more severe in children. Since the first case in the US was documented on May 18, cases have skyrocketed to 14,115, with the real figure likely far higher due to limited testing. Already, over 10 children in the US have confirmed infections, with reports of students and staff exposed or infected at day care centers and university campuses.

**The role of the teachers unions**

Throughout the pandemic, the teachers unions have operated as the gendarme of Wall Street, smothering the opposition of educators and students, standing by and remaining silent as thousands of teachers died or developed Long COVID. Walkouts, sickouts and strikes were systematically shut down by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which betrayed powerful

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strikes and protests in Minneapolis, New York City, Sacramento, Oakland, Scranton, Chicago, Philadelphia and dozens of other cities.

AFT President Randi Weingarten (annual salary roughly $500,000) has played a pivotal role in forcing teachers back into unsafe buildings, bragging last year that she spent 15 hours a day and $5 million of teachers' dues money to promote her "school reopening" tour. Everywhere that teachers walked out, she flew into town to ram through rotten agreements that failed to improve working conditions, wages or safety.

In what amounts to a self-indictment as a criminal co-conspirator in the Biden administration's pandemic policies, Weingarten praised the latest CDC guidelines, stating, "now is not the time for new mandates." Under conditions in which the Republican Party is openly transforming itself into a fascist party led by the would-be dictator Donald Trump, the Democrats are relying on the trade unions to suppress the working class and block strikes.

**Public education's existential crisis**

The pandemic has vastly accelerated the decades-long bipartisan assault on public education, resulting in what many teachers have described as a complete breakdown of the school system. The past two years have been defined by a wave of mass resignations and early retirements, with the NEA estimating that there are now 300,000 teaching and staff vacancies across the US.

The capitalist politicians' answer to this crisis has been to slash teacher training and certification requirements. Whether or not someone is qualified does not matter; they need warm bodies in the classrooms. As just one example, lawmakers in Florida created a program for military veterans without college degrees to receive a five-year temporary teaching certificate.

Billions of dollars in budget cuts, layoffs and school closures are being planned across the US, including in New York City, Sacramento, Chicago and Los Angeles. This takes place on top of the veritable social counterrevolution which stripped nearly $600 billion from public schools between 2008 and 2018.

Meanwhile, Wall Street profiteers have exploited the demand for safe remote learning by luring parents into notoriously poor-performing virtual charter schools, while others have sought to expand voucher programs to funnel public money into private and religious schools, a trend strengthened by the Supreme Court's *Carson v. Makin* ruling.

Students' lives and education have indeed been upended throughout the pandemic, but this is the result of the wholesale subordination of public education to the capitalist profit system, not because of remote learning. Years before the pandemic, global progress against "learning poverty," the measurement of children unable to read at comprehension by age 10, had stagnated. The same politicians who demanded schools reopen have cut budgets and allowed universal free lunches to expire, placing 10 million kids at risk of going hungry at school.

**The need for rank-and-file committees**

Teachers must harness their collective strength, unify across the country and internationally, and prepare for a nationwide educators' strike to stop both pandemics and to demand a giant investment in public education. The first step is the expansion of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in solidarity with the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), by building local committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the trade unions and capitalist political parties.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators to build these committees to fight for:

• **The elimination of COVID-19 and monkeypox!** From a scientific standpoint, it is both possible and necessary to eliminate these diseases. The only thing standing in the way is capitalism and the subordination of public health to private profit. All schools must temporarily switch to fully-remote learning, as part of a broader strategy to stop infections, including mass testing, contact tracing, universal mask mandates, and all public health measures needed to stop viral transmission. The past two years have proven it is impossible to "safely" reopen schools during a raging pandemic. Half-way mitigation measures are not enough to stop the spread of COVID-19 and unnecessarily place the burden of public health onto individual teachers.

• **The expropriation of the billionaires and pandemic profiteers!** The trillions of dollars handed to the rich through the CARES Act must be redistributed to provide all workers and parents with money to stay home while both pandemics are contained, and to provide universal high-speed internet, remote learning infrastructure, health care, and mental health and special education support to all students. These resources must also be used to modernize all public school buildings, including their HVAC, water and waste systems. Only 39 percent of school districts have improved HVAC systems in some buildings during the pandemic.

• **Massive pay increases to hire and retain educators!** Teachers cannot teach properly if their classrooms are overcrowded or they are forced to cover multiple lessons at once. Real wages and benefits have been cut or frozen for years. Substantial pay increases are necessary to compensate for years of stagnating wages, including automatic cost-of-living provisions to keep up with inflation, and for health care to be fully covered by employers.

The fight for such a program requires the independent mobilization of educators, in the US and around the world, in unity with all sections of the working class.

Above all, the past two years have proven that public education cannot thrive, let alone survive, within capitalism. The policy of the ruling class, in response to the pandemic as with everything else, is determined by one fundamental consideration: profit.

The fight against the pandemic and the defense and expansion of public education is inextricably connected to the mobilization of the entire working class to take political power in the US and around the world and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, that is, to replace capitalism with socialism.

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