

US Educators Rank and File Safety Committee holds critical meeting in defense of public education and against the spread of COVID-19

Our reporters
1 September 2022

The US Educators Rank and File Safety Committee held a very well attended online meeting last Saturday to continue and strengthen its fight against reckless school reopenings as the coronavirus and monkeypox pandemics threaten millions of children and their families and neighbors.

In attendance were teachers and parents from cities across the US, including Detroit, Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, Oakland and many others. Also in attendance was Tania Kent, a teacher and Socialist Equality Party member from the United Kingdom, and Guilherme Ferreira, a teacher in Brazil, both of whom gave extended reports detailing the crisis of education and bourgeois rule more broadly in each of their respective countries.

Dr. Benjamin Mateus, a practicing physician who has written extensively on the COVID-19 pandemic, gave detailed remarks on the disease's progress to meeting attendees. Will Lehman, a United Auto Workers (UAW) member and socialist candidate for UAW president, spoke to attendees on the need for teachers and other workers to take up a political fight against the Democrats and the trade union apparatus, which are working class organizations in name only.

The opening report was delivered by Renae Cassimeda, a teacher in Southern California and leading member of the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee. In the report, Cassimeda stressed the catastrophic effect the coronavirus pandemic has had on teachers, students and staff. Cassimeda explained that the pandemic was not primarily a medical crisis, but a crisis spawned by capitalism.

Since the pandemic began more than two and half years ago, Cassimeda noted, a new billionaire has been created every 26 minutes, while the 400 richest Americans have a total of \$1 trillion in net wealth. Moreover, this takes place under conditions where 50 percent of Americans don't have enough savings to meet a \$400 emergency.

Public schools and the education profession itself have also been under sustained attack by the pandemic profiteers. Between January 2020 and April 2022, 2.6 million US teachers and school workers in K-12 and higher education combined quit their jobs, as Democratic- and Republican-run cities alike insisted that little to nothing would be done to halt the spread of the pandemic, with

schools to be fully open to in-person learning.

Additionally, 1.3 million workers in K-12 and higher education were laid off during the same period due to massive cuts to public education and college budgets, as the ruling class prioritized the further enrichment of the ultra-wealthy and massive funding increases for the military.

Cassimeda also discussed the massive growth in opposition within the working class, including powerful strikes in the US and around the world. Two thousand Kaiser Permanente mental health workers in Northern California recently struck, along with four thousand teachers in Columbus, Ohio and one thousand teachers in Kent, Washington. The American Federation of Teachers, with 1.6 million members, and the National Education Association, with 3.2 million members the nation's largest single union, however, have done nothing to unify the struggles of teachers. In fact Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, has led a campaign to keep schools open, a campaign on which she says she works "15 hours a day."

After Cassimeda spoke, Tania Kent described the horrific impact of school reopenings in the United Kingdom. From April 1 until mid-June this year, coronavirus infections increased by 43 percent, infecting one out of every 50 people in the country.

The British ruling class has declared open war against workers. Those relieved by the departure of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who openly backed the homicidal and unscientific herd immunity policy and infamously declared, "let the bodies pile high in their thousands," will find no change in the coming to power of Liz Truss, who recently expressed no qualms about launching nuclear missiles even if it meant global annihilation.

The British Labour Party, for its part, Kent reported, has shown that it has no significant political differences with the Tories. Labour Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting stated earlier this year that "for the sake of our children, we must never shut our country again." The National Education Union also parroted the lying claim that schools were safe even though thousands upon thousands of teachers and students have fallen ill from COVID. "Schools are the safest place for children to be," declared a recent NEU statement.

Kent also noted that virtual school strikes held by UK parent Lisa Diaz encountered open opposition from the UK teachers union even though the intent of the strikes was to save the lives of teachers and students.

Guilherme Ferreira, a teacher in Brazil, described the immense crisis of capitalist rule in that country. The pandemic has been recklessly downplayed, with the fascist President Jair Bolsonaro in the lead. Mitigation measures have been entirely abandoned, with a massive, coordinated campaign against vaccinations underway. The federal health budget in Brazil declined by 79 percent during the first year of the pandemic alone. As a result of all these anti-public health and anti-science measures, life expectancy in Brazil has dropped by a full four years since the pandemic began.

In implementing this agenda, Bolsonaro has met no opposition from the political establishment, including nominally “left” parties such as the PT (Workers Party) of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Dr. Benjamin Mateus also provided further details of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. In the most recent estimates, 16.3 million working age Americans now have long COVID, whose symptoms can include muscle weakness, headaches, shortness of breath, loss of smell and cognitive dysfunction and other effects. It has been recently discovered that patients with long COVID are at elevated risk of heart attack or stroke, a risk that can persist for many months after the initial infection clears.

Due to many such factors, approximately 2 to 4 million Americans are unable to work due to long COVID symptoms. While long COVID may not result in immediate death or debilitation, it can lead to the loss of employment and the loss of access to health insurance and other needed services, vital for health maintenance.

The initial reports to the meeting were followed by an extended question and answer session, with contributions from several teachers and parents, some who were attending a rank and file committee meeting for the first time.

Anthony W., a teacher in Dayton, Ohio, stressed the need for worker solidarity as the new school year begins. “We must realize our common cause, we can’t depend on the Democrats or Republicans. The Democrats, the ‘friends of education’ have been ignoring and sabotaging the effort to strike. Likewise the unions.”

Colleen, an office worker in San Francisco, is a parent of an eighth grade high school student who was recently required to go back to school in person.

“I always felt that kids going to school represented the greatest vector of transmission. In our school system, we have, next to Vermont, the highest rate of initial vaccinations, although a lower rate of boosting. That does not prevent transmission, but is one of the many tools we have. I have a lot of concerns though. My daughter started remote in March 2020. It wasn’t a great emotional experience, with a lack of transparency, but the admins were doing the best they could without guidance and funding. I had no choice this year to send my 8th grader back to in-person school. The CDC’s latest decisions infuriate me as everything is left to individual choice.”

Doris, a Chicago public school substitute teacher, relayed her experiences as schools opened for the year.

“We had 21 cases of COVID this week in my school. Cases are now up five percent for adults and three percent for students and we, substitute teachers, don’t have sick days. We don’t get reimbursed if we get sick. Many have long COVID. Now the district is assigning subs to long-term full-time positions for which the subs aren’t qualified.”

Aliyah, a parent from Detroit, relayed her experience sending her 7th grade child back into the classroom.

“Detroit Public Schools (DPS) does not have any measures in place for monkeypox. In fact, I don’t believe that they are giving teachers, or the available nurses even, any warning signs. COVID testing stopped in the summertime. Over \$1.3 billion sent to DPS is gone. This year is supposed to be based on ‘academic recovery,’ but after this year, the nurses might be gone, layoffs for teachers, etc. This district failed with the money.

“Also, they’ve been bragging that they don’t have a teacher shortage, but I know for a fact that there are 50 openings for both paraprofessionals and teachers, and when school starts next Monday, I expect that number will be revealed to be even higher.”

Will Lehman also spoke powerfully on his campaign for UAW president, insisting that his campaign was not based on the false perspective of reforming the UAW apparatus but instead sought to abolish it and place the union’s immense resources in the hands of rank and file workers.

“Our turn needs to be to the working class,” Lehman said. “We’re the ones suffering and we’re the masses. We keep society moving, we have the power to shut society down. Bezos and Musk etc. do nothing but exploit workers for a living. That is the only thing they do. We don’t need them, they need us.

“Turning to bureaucrats doesn’t work. Voting for a different person does not work. That is why my campaign is oriented towards popularizing the rank and file committees. I’m not a magician. As an autoworker, I can’t work in the union apparatus just like a parent or teacher can’t hope to work in the district or union apparatus either.

“As workers, you need to turn to other workers you’re around to build these rank and file committee. It might seem daunting, but the reality is that the capitalist class is going to take more and more. They do not care about the damage they inflict on the workers. That’s why we need to start now and need to organize now. Those on the fence—what more will they need to take from you until you turn to the working class?”

For more information on building a rank and file committee at your school or workplace, fill out the form below:



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact