

The crisis in education and the case for rank-and-file committees

Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee

16 October 2022

The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met on October 8 and authorized this statement, based on the opening report to the meeting.

Educators everywhere face an untenable crisis: low wages, long hours, short-staffing and impossible job pressures; nearly three years of pandemic-related illness, debilitation and death. These have taken an immeasurable toll on educators, and the problems are ongoing.

Not only do we confront increasing attacks on our jobs. We, as part of the working class, confront a mounting crisis in the entire political and social order of world capitalism—from rising inflation and prices, to growing austerity, the threat of dictatorship and attacks on our democratic rights, environmental disaster and the unmitigated spread of disease and the very real threat of nuclear world war.

These conditions are driving the upsurge of the class struggle internationally. In the US and Europe, across the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, millions of workers are initiating strike action against austerity and the devastating consequences of the pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

It is increasingly clear that to wage a real fight to defend our jobs and public education as well as to stop the pandemic and to prevent nuclear world war requires that we unite our struggles with those of workers across industries and internationally. The trade unions, which keep us isolated from each other and betray our interests at every turn, will not wage such a fight. We must do it ourselves, by expanding the network of rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In this explosive situation, every educator, student and parent who stands up now to build a rank-and-file committee can play a decisive role in leading the immense struggles of the working class on the immediate horizon.

The most conscious expression of the need to free the working class from the trade unions is the campaign of socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who is running for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

In his call for the building of a rank-and-file movement, Will speaks for millions of workers who must reject the notion that the workers have anything to gain from the capitalist system or from the parasitic layer of labor bureaucrats that act in coordination with the corporations and state apparatus to suppress the class struggle. Our committee stands in solidarity with his campaign and will

seek to mobilize support for it among educators.

The real conditions we face in schools

The daily reality that we as educators face stands in stark contrast to the lying claim by US President Joe Biden that “the pandemic is over.” As governments at every level cut funding for pandemic safety resources, teachers and parents of our committee have reported that COVID-19 is spreading widely in their schools.

As is the case across the US, in New York City, the largest school district in the US with over 1 million students, mitigation measures have been completely dropped and the education department has abandoned any efforts to conduct testing or contact tracing. Under conditions in which positivity rates are over 10 percent in the region and thousands are out sick, school administrations are conducting operations as if COVID-19 is merely an individual problem.

At the same time, a historic, bipartisan assault on public education has been mounted against the American working class in the wake of the pandemic. In New York City, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams has gutted funds for education by hundreds of millions, if not over a billion dollars this year. The effect of this attack has been that hundreds of our coworkers—art teachers, band directors, early education and special education support staff, to name a few—have been “excessed” with little or no notice while we are left to pick up the pieces. A month after the school year has begun, the impact of this devastating austerity program has only just begun to make itself felt.

In Boston, the threat to place the entire public school district into a state of “direct receivership,” placing public education in the hands of private interests, was used as a bludgeon to force workers to accept a pathetic contract for the 2022–23 school year.

The ruling elites claim there is no money for public education and health, but we know that this is a lie. Instead of meeting the basic needs of the population, they are dead set on forcing workers to pay for their ruthless domestic policies and criminal military operations abroad. Tens of billions of dollars have been diverted into the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which is now on the brink of a nuclear cataclysm, while the US Federal Reserve seeks to trigger a recession with the aim of beating back

workers' demands for better wages and living standards.

The threat of nuclear world war

Biden has made it perfectly clear that the world is on the brink of a nuclear war. Speaking to a private audience of billionaires, he said, “[W]e have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis.” The destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline, the terrorist bombing of the Kerch bridge by the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, and the subsequent escalation of operations by both sides of the conflict, should be taken as a sharp warning to the international working class that the ruling class is prepared to threaten the very existence of human civilization to achieve its geostrategic aims.

The US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine is the outcome of decades in which the US has sought to offset its declining economic position through military interventions abroad. The US' criminal wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Libya, Serbia and elsewhere, which have devastated entire societies, are the direct manifestations of this process.

At the same time, the corrupt Putin regime, whose bankrupt strategy is based on Russian chauvinism and nationalism, is incapable of opposing imperialism or finding a progressive resolution to the conflict. It can only proceed through the most desperate and reactionary measures against the Ukrainian and Russian working class.

The role of the trade unions

We confront not only attacks from the school districts and the politicians on behalf of big business, but also the treachery of the trade unions, which try to strangle our opposition and keep us tied to the capitalist political parties.

This is true not only in education but in all sectors. Over 100,000 rail workers in the US voted for strike action months ago, but the rail unions have used one delay tactic after another to stall a nationwide rail strike in order not to disrupt the economy and hurt the Democrats ahead of the midterms.

Our own unions perfectly encapsulate the true function of these immense bureaucracies.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten (salary nearly \$500,000), anticipating mass opposition to school reopenings in the 2021–22 school year, spent \$5 million in dues money to tour the country promoting the lie that schools can be in-person safely during a raging pandemic.

During the height of the Delta surge last fall, as record numbers of children were being infected, hospitalized and dying of COVID-19, Weingarten partnered with far-right and pseudo-scientific forces, including Open Schools USA and Jay Bhattacharya, a co-author of the mass-infection manifesto, the

Great Barrington Declaration, to demand that schools stay open.

Now Weingarten is on a pro-war tour in Ukraine, operating not as a representative of teachers but as a loyal servant to the US war machine. On her trip, she deliberately covered up the role of Ukrainian fascists in collaborating in the Holocaust during World War II.

Michael Mulgrew, successor to Weingarten as president of New York's United Federation of Teachers (UFT), is a similarly high-paid parasite of the trade union apparatus. He has been instrumental in suppressing educator opposition to the spread of COVID-19 and ratifying completely inadequate contracts among New York City educators for over a decade.

Mulgrew and the UFT leadership have effectively demobilized educators during the current contract negotiations while the bargaining committee meets behind closed doors. Each member of the 500-person committee has allegedly signed non-disclosure agreements, showcasing the anti-democratic nature of the bargaining process under the aegis of the union bureaucrats.

These bureaucrats do not represent us, and we must organize ourselves to take our collective power out of their grip.

The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on educators, school staff, parents and students to build the rank-and-file movement in our area and beyond to defend workplace safety, living standards and public education. Our committee, in conjunction with our sister committees throughout the US and internationally, also have a critical role to play in mobilizing the working class against the threat of war and the pandemic, which is of urgent necessity to workers everywhere.

We demand:

- Reverse all budget cuts and restore all jobs and programs cut from the schools!

- For the elimination of COVID-19! This requires the full-scale mobilization of all public health measures available, including temporary lockdowns to stop transmission with full financial support to workers and families, a program of mass testing and contact tracing, free high quality masks and the renovation of ventilation and filtration systems in all schools and public places. Along with this, high quality remote learning infrastructure and free high speed internet must be provided to all students.

- A 40 percent pay raise for in-service educators. Full restoration of medical benefits for retirees and current employees!

- Rank-and-file oversight of all contract negotiations!

- Hundreds of billions of dollars for education to be paid for by the expropriation of the billionaires.

- Immediately stop US supply of weapons and funds to Ukraine! Educators must play a central role in turning the youth to the working class and building a mass anti-war movement on an international basis.



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