

Build rank-and-file committees to fight for high quality education and an end to the pandemic!

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (US)
7 February 2023

After three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis in public education across the United States has reached an unprecedented level of breakdown and dysfunction, which is steadily worsening.

The Biden administration's insistence on face-to-face learning and abandonment of public health measures have guaranteed wave after wave of mass infections and deaths. The latest subvariant of Omicron, XBB.1.5, is now ripping through schools, the primary COVID-19 transmission sites throughout the pandemic.

Despite Biden's lies that the "pandemic is over," hundreds of Americans continue to die of COVID every day. The deceased include parents, grandparents, educators and even children.

As of last week, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recorded a total of 2,071 child deaths ages 0-17 from COVID-19, an increase of 96 deaths over the past four weeks. According to the CDC, a staggering 96.3 percent of children have been infected with COVID-19 at least once. More than 200,000 children in the US have lost a parent or primary caregiver. The pandemic is also a mass disabling event, with millions now suffering from Long COVID for unknown duration.

Every aspect of public education has been impacted by the bipartisan policy of allowing the pandemic to spread and keeping workers on the job. School infrastructure, including indoor air quality, remains abysmal across the country. Mass resignations and the toll of Long COVID have further exacerbated preexisting staffing shortages of nurses, teachers, substitutes and other staff.

Students are now regularly herded into auditoriums, where they are babysat, not taught. Many districts have eliminated bus services and shortened the school week. Last year, the Biden White House allowed the universal free lunch program to expire, impacting an estimated 10 million children.

All of this exposes the politicians' feigned concern about "learning loss" and child hunger, talking points used to reopen schools and push parents back to work.

At the same time, their supposed concern for students' mental health is a fraud. There is only one counselor for every 400 students, despite a mental health crisis gripping the youth. A 2022 report from the National Alliance on Mental Illness showed that a staggering 20 percent of high school students reported serious thoughts of suicide and 9 percent had made an attempt to take their lives.

In the face of this systemic breakdown, the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), and all of their state and local affiliates, have done worse than nothing. They have imposed these conditions on rebellious educators who have protested, demonstrated, struck and petitioned throughout the pandemic and who have fought for higher wages in the face of rampant inflation.

It was rank-and-file teachers who shut down schools in March of 2020

as the danger of COVID-19 was downplayed by the unions in collaboration with federal, state and local governments. Ever since the fall of 2020, mass strikes and protests against dangerous school reopening policies were sabotaged by the union bureaucracies who helped push students and educators back into unsafe classrooms.

Strikes continued throughout 2022, proving that educators still want to fight, and they will continue in the coming year. For the coming struggles to be successful, educators need new forms of organization, independent rank-and-file committees, to establish workers' power in the schools and enable them to fight for their interests in opposition to the union bureaucracies and the capitalist state. This is the necessary basis for organizing a counter-offensive for the defense of public education, educators' livelihoods and the well-being of their students.

2022: A year of opposition to the spread of COVID and intolerable working conditions

From beginning to end, 2022 was characterized by major struggles among educators.

At the start of the year, educators joined with students in walk-outs and protests internationally against the reopening of schools amid the first catastrophic wave of the Omicron variant. A map created by the WWSW, which is by no means an exhaustive compilation, shows educator and student strikes, walkouts and protests in every region of the US—from New York to Oakland, Chicago to Louisiana—as well as throughout Canada, France, Italy, Greece, Australia, Nigeria and elsewhere, against COVID-19, as well as strikes for better wages and working conditions in 2022.

Nearly 1 million children were officially infected with COVID-19 in the US during the week of January 19 alone. Nevertheless, the CDC issued a series of anti-scientific guideline changes, insisted upon by the Biden administration, to allow for the further lifting of mitigations in schools.

Amid mounting child infections, hospitalizations and deaths, on February 11, AFT President Randi Weingarten called for an "off ramp" for mask mandates while working to stifle mass opposition and stoke illusions in the Democratic Party. This came amid an unrelenting propaganda campaign in the corporate media proclaiming that the population would have to "live with the virus."

That same month, the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine broke out, fueling an already dire inflationary crisis throughout the world. Over the past year, the US has funneled tens of billions of dollars to the reactionary Ukrainian regime while claiming there are no funds to fight

the pandemic or improve public education or social services.

Record inflation, compounded with already intolerable conditions in schools built up over decades of eroding pay and budget cuts, provoked teachers to strike for better pay, better staffing ratios, COVID protections and funding for integral services such as special education. Throughout 2022, teachers were a component part of a resurgence of the international class struggle in every major industry throughout the world.

A snapshot of these struggles include:

- In **January**, the 10-week strike of 3,000 academic workers at Columbia University in New York was sabotaged by their union.

- In **February**, bus drivers in Louisiana carried out wildcat sickouts over increased workloads and low pay.

- In **March**, 4,500 teachers and support staff in Minneapolis Public Schools struck for over two weeks. Two Chicago-area teacher strikes broke out in Proviso and Riverdale Illinois during this time, and 6,000 teachers in Sacramento City Unified School District went on strike March 23.

- In **April**, 2,000 Oakland, California, teachers conducted a one-day strike over the announcement of seven school closures in the upcoming school year. That same month, the AFT intervened to shut down a strike of over 1,500 graduate student workers at the University of Illinois Chicago fighting against poverty wages.

- In **May**, over 1,200 educators at Brookline Public Schools in Massachusetts held a one-day strike, and a strike of 2,500 graduate students at Indiana University was suspended on May 10.

- In **August**, 4,000 teachers in Ohio's largest school district, the Columbus City Schools, struck.

- In **September**, 6,000 teachers and school staff at Seattle Public Schools in Washington struck for one week. The union deliberately isolated Seattle teachers from striking teachers in neighboring Washington districts of Kent, Tumwater, Eatonville and Ridgefield.

The year closed with the record strike by 48,000 academic workers at the University of California demanding better pay and working conditions. The powerful six-week strike was the largest in higher education in US history and was sabotaged by the union apparatus, which worked systematically to divide and isolate academic workers and suppress rank-and-file opposition, pushing through a contract which met none of the major demands. The four-week strike of faculty at the New School in New York City was shut down on New Year's eve.

On the international arena, there were also significant strikes of 20,000 teachers in Australia and 55,000 education workers in Ontario, Canada, as well as major protests in Brazil, Venezuela, Lebanon, and elsewhere. There was a months-long work stoppage by university lecturers in Nigeria, university teacher strikes in Ghana, as well as multiple protests by teachers in Iran for better working conditions and to protect free education, among other global struggles of educators.

The union bureaucracies internationally have increasingly utilized openly anti-democratic tactics in their attempts to stymie the growing rebellion of the working class. Working together with the capitalist state, they aim to suppress working class opposition, isolate and disorient teachers and staff, and prevent them from uniting across districts and with workers in other industries.

Last year's bipartisan congressional injunction to halt the strike of rail workers and impose a contract workers openly rejected indicates that the government, with the help of the unions, will stop at nothing to ensure the steady flow of profits for the financial elite.

The trade union apparatus is a political prop for the Democratic Party, US imperialism, and the capitalist system. This is epitomized by Weingarten's trip to Ukraine last October, in which she gave full support to the US-NATO war against Russia and covered up the role of Ukrainian fascists in the Holocaust. The unions' support for imperialist war, which includes covering up the threat of nuclear war, aims to assist the ruling

class in turning attention away from the profound domestic crisis in the US.

2023: A year of growing struggles by educators and all workers

As the New Year statement of the Socialist Equality Party makes clear, 2023 will be characterized by a deepening of the crisis of world capitalism, propelling ever broader layers of workers into struggle, including educators. The pandemic, the economic crisis, the breakdown of democracy and attacks on democratic rights, and the reckless escalation of the war in Ukraine, will all deepen in the coming months.

In the US, the year began with the deepening of the rightward lurch of official politics, when 20 fascist Republicans, who collaborated in the January 6, 2021 coup attempt, prevented the certification of House Speaker until their demands were met. At the heart of this conflict in the ruling class are plans for the further evisceration of what little remains of a social safety net. With the total capitulation of the Democratic Party, Congress has set the stage for a social counterrevolution in which public education will be a central target.

These attacks are being met by a powerful desire of workers to fight back, with numerous struggles looming on the horizon. Already in the opening weeks of the year, teachers in both Akron, Ohio, and Melrose, Massachusetts, were determined to strike but stifled by the trade unions.

Teachers and education workers in six out of the seven largest school districts in the US are either working under expired contracts or face contract expirations this year.

These include 75,000 educators in New York City, the largest district in the US, who have been under an expired contract since last September, as well as 24,000 teachers and 50,000 education workers in Los Angeles, the second-largest district, whose contract expired last June. LAUSD education workers under SEIU Local 99 are voting to authorize strike action this month. Teachers in Oakland have also been forced to strike under an expired contract since October 2021.

In Florida, the epicenter of the far-right's efforts to dismantle public education, multiple districts have teacher contracts expiring this year, including Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the fourth largest district in the US with over 18,000 teachers.

Teachers in Woburn, Massachusetts, recently went on strike for adequate pay raises and funding for their schools, before being betrayed by their union. Despite punitive laws in the state that fine public sector workers for illegal strike action, teachers and paraprofessionals overwhelmingly rejected two sellout deals negotiated by local union officials with the district and mayor.

Opposition among academic workers in higher education will also continue in the new year. University of Illinois Chicago faculty struck this month and multiple universities have expiring contracts for academic workers, including 11,000 graduate students in the California State University system.

Form Rank-and-File Committees to carry forward the fight for public education!

Educators must take stock of the lessons of the entire experience of the pandemic and the preceding four decades, which proved that the trade union bureaucracies function as corporatist agencies bound to the Democratic Party. Headed by multi-millionaires like Weingarten and

staffed by thousands of upper-middle-class bureaucrats who net salaries far above that of the average teacher, they defend the capitalist system and their privileged positions in society.

Throughout the world, workers are increasingly coming into direct and sharp conflict with the union bureaucracies. These organizations are diametrically opposed to rank-and-file workers' fight for a livable income, safety at the workplace and access to fundamental social rights.

To fight for their interests, educators must establish political and organizational independence through the building and expansion of rank-and-file committees across the US and internationally. These committees, which have been formed by educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class, represent the interests of the working class in direct opposition to the dictates of the ruling elites, who intend to cut public education to the bone.

These committees must link internationally and across industries, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Only on this basis can the working class put an end to the destruction of public education and carry out a larger struggle against all the ills of the capitalist system, including poverty, homelessness, lack of access to health care, attacks on immigrants, mass COVID infection, climate change, and war.



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