At House hearing on COVID-19

AFT President Randi Weingarten defends push to reopen schools during pandemic

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Last week, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten testified before the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, whose Republican leadership has made school closures a focus of right-wing attacks on even the most minimal public health measures to fight the deadly virus. They absurdly accuse Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, of enforcing school closures.

Weingarten used the hearing to tout her role in overriding opposition from educators and parents to unsafe conditions and reopening schools at the height of the pandemic. That she backs the Biden administration's profits-before lives COVID policy and its false claim that the pandemic is "over" was shown by her maskless appearance at a hearing where none of the panel members or members of the audience wore a mask.

Michigan Democrat Debbie Dingell made a virtue of this criminal negligence, declaring, "We've entered a new phase of the pandemic. Look around. We're not wearing masks."

On May 11, Biden will officially end the COVID national emergency, setting the stage for ending free or subsidized vaccination and testing, and further gutting efforts to track the disease and its impact on public health.

Weingarten's statements at the hearing underscored her record as an agent of the ruling class and its drive to force open schools in the interests of American capitalism.

Despite tactical differences between the Republicans and the Democrats, all participants in the hearing have collaborated in the systematic effort to cover up the ongoing pandemic, undermine basic public health measures, and subordinate the lives and health of millions of children and educators to private profit. The subcommittee is unified across party lines in promoting the Wuhan lab leak conspiracy theory to justify Washington's war drive against China.

While the most reactionary layers within the Republican Party, such as Marjorie Taylor-Greene, no doubt see Weingarten, who is Jewish and gay, as grist for their fascistic propaganda mill, the fact is that Weingarten agrees with them that schools must be kept open no matter the cost to human life.

In the course of the nearly three-hour hearing, Weingarten defended her record of intervening across the country to ensure that schools shut by strikes were reopened and the opposition of rank-and-file AFT members to exposing themselves, their students and their families to needless infection was overcome.

Throughout the hearing, both parties blamed remote learning for the mental health crisis among youth and for declining standardized test scores, and agreed that schools must stay open in the event of future pandemics.

As Weingarten and the Democrats were eager to boast, the school reopening campaign initiated by Donald Trump in the summer of 2020 was accelerated under Biden's administration, which had as its first domestic priority the full reopening of all schools. When Biden was inaugurated, approximately 46 percent of schools were operating in-person. By May 2021, 96 percent were open. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) played an essential role in this campaign, issuing unscientific guidance in February 2021 that justified the campaign to reopen all schools no matter the level of transmission.

At the hearing, Weingarten criticized Trump for keeping schools closed too long. She stated that as early as February 2020 she "spent every day ... trying to get schools open," with no assistance from Trump or his billionaire Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

She touted the fact that in April 2020, when workers across the US and around the world were protesting against the premature push to reopen schools and workplaces, the AFT produced its own school reopening plan, demonstrating the organization's readiness to collaborate with the Trump administration.

Democrat Jamie Raskin accused Trump of being too busy "defending his friends in the Chinese Communist Party" to work with the union bureaucracies to reopen the schools.

Throughout the hearing, Republicans repeated the lies that COVID-19 transmission among children is "rare" and that transmission inside schools is "low." They referenced studies from the summer of 2020, before students were herded en masse into poorly ventilated classrooms, to claim that the risk to children was minimal, ignoring the three years of data and experience since then that prove the opposite.

Not once did Weingarten or any other Democrat seriously challenge these lies by detailing the nearly universal infection of American children. To do so would have meant acknowledging the criminal role of the Biden administration, which kept schools open during the Delta and Omicron waves, leading to record infections, hospitalizations and deaths among children. Biden himself repeated these lies early in his presidency when he told a second

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grader at a televised town hall meeting that “kids don’t get COVID very often.”

Even as early as the summer of 2020, it was clear that COVID-19 posed a serious risk to children. By July, the CDC had recorded 121 deaths among people 21 or younger. By September, over 277,000 infections had been documented in children.

Today, sero-prevalence studies show that more than 65 million children (over 96 percent) in the US have been infected at least once. Over 190,000 have been hospitalized and at least 2,200 have died from COVID-19, according to CDC data, with the disease now a leading cause of death in children.

Neither Weingarten nor anyone else at the hearing mentioned the unknown long-term consequences of repeated infections. The term “Long COVID” was never uttered, despite the well documented, far-ranging risks this debilitating condition poses to both adults and children, including life-threatening problems involving the lungs, heart, veins and kidneys.

The fact that millions of children and educators have suffered repeated waves of illness, requiring schools to close due to widespread staff and student absences, was not once cited as a contributing factor in learning loss. Likewise, the politicians and Weingarten, in their effort to blame negative learning impacts from the pandemic on temporary school closures, downplayed the devastating impact of the loss of parents, family members, friends and classmates who were needlessly infected with COVID-19 as a result of the unsafe reopening of schools.

The other great unmentionable for Weingarten and every committee member was the international wave of educator, student and parent struggles against the bipartisan policy of mass infection and death. These struggles took the form of walkouts and wildcat sickouts and strikes from 2020 through the Omicron surge in 2022, in which the rank and file demanded remote education to stop transmission.

Weingarten’s role throughout this period, with the full power of the AFT bureaucracy in coordination with the National Education Association (NEA) bureaucracy, was to isolate and sabotage educators’ strikes and work closely with the Biden administration to convince educators that the schools were safe.

At the hearing, Weingarten referred to the AFT’s tireless work to get teachers back to work, including hosting “town halls,” overseeing a “$5 million campaign to get people back to school,” conducting “door to door visits, radio ads, etc.” One such town hall was a collaborative effort with the right-wing parents’ group Open Schools USA, which featured anti-mask pseudo-scientists such as Jay Bhattacharya, an author of the The Great Barrington Declaration.

Weingarten responded to pressure by Republican Representative Rich McCormick to “admit” her “mistakes” by stating that she “regrets the fear that was there.” She thereby slandered the determined fight by educators to defend themselves and their students against needless infection and death, attributing it to misplaced “fear,” and lining up with the most vicious enemies of the working class.

This is a slap in the face to the 268,000 US children who have been orphaned from COVID-19 and to the memory of over 8,000 educators in the US who have died.

The past three years have proven that far from representing the interests of teachers, the entire AFT bureaucracy is a political prop for the Democratic Party and for American capitalism more generally. While paying out over $20 million in 2022 to Democratic Party campaigns, not a cent in strike pay has been given to the thousands of academic workers affiliated with the AFT who have struck this year.

Randi Weingarten, a multi-millionaire bureaucrat who makes nearly $500,000 per year taken from workers’ dues money, has played a particularly filthy role in serving the interests of American imperialism both in the United States and abroad. In addition to coercing teachers and students back into COVID-infested classrooms, she has aggressively supported the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which is bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. Last year, she visited Ukraine to promote Washington's war effort, during which she met with ultra-nationalists while covering up the role of Ukrainian fascism in the Holocaust.

Educators must take stock of this record and draw the necessary conclusions in order to prepare for the struggles ahead. The Democrats and Republicans are colluding to slash social spending in order to divert all resources to war against Russia and preparations for war against China. This is already translating into massive cuts to education budgets in districts across the US, a process that is driving teachers into increasingly sharp conflict not only with their districts, but with the trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party.

Regarding COVID-19, only the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have fought and continue to fight for a global elimination strategy to end the pandemic and uphold the principles of public health. This program, when it is clearly explained, receives a warm response from the working class and youth.

At the same time, the ICFI is assisting workers in building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to smash the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies, bring together the struggles of educators and all workers on a world scale, and unite the international working class in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Join today.

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