

US public schools open for Fall 2023 amid wave of educators' struggles

Renae Cassimeda
16 August 2023

Tell us what conditions are like at your school with the start of fall classes by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Most school districts throughout the US are reopening this month for the new school year under dire conditions. Significant staffing shortages continue to cripple school districts, millions in state and federal funds are on the chopping block and a major summer surge in COVID cases is poised to fuel mass infections in poorly mitigated schools.

Outbreak of educator struggles

A wave of school strikes are coming in the next several weeks. Teachers and staff are demanding safer working conditions, an end to understaffing, more school resources and higher pay.

In **Ohio**, teachers in the Youngstown City School District issued a 10-day strike notice last Tuesday. Their contract with the district expired June 30. Teachers in the neighboring Southeast Local School District in Ravenna are also heading into the new school year with an expired contract. The union local spokesperson informed local news media that the union is prepared to file its 10-day strike notice.

In **Las Vegas, Nevada**, an estimated 2,000 teachers rallied at the school board meeting last Thursday after a week of protests outside school sites across the district. On July 31, the Clark County School District (CCSD) announced it was seeking an injunction against the Clark County Education Association (CCEA) to prevent a potential strike at the beginning of the school year. The union had released a statement in July that it would consider work actions if a new agreement was not reached by August 26. The district also filed a petition with the state Employee-Management Relations Board seeking to withdraw the bargaining rights of the union. Both parties are set for a court hearing August 22.

CCSD is the fifth-largest school district in the US, with over 315,000 students. In addition to a pay increase, teachers are demanding the district address the massive teacher shortage. There are currently 1,100 vacancies just before the start of the school year.

In **California**, teachers in the Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), the third largest in the state with 70,000 students, have been working under an expired contract since June 2022. In a show of pre-emptive bullying against a potential strike, the district has announced that if the Fresno Teachers Association gives notice for a strike, it will attempt to keep schools open by paying substitutes \$500 per day as

strikebreakers. According to the FTA, if the district and union don't come to an agreement by September 29, it will call for a strike authorization vote.

In **New York**, bus drivers at four major school bus companies contracted by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) voted overwhelmingly to strike last June. Democratic mayor Eric Adams and his administration expressed concern that a strike by bus drivers in the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) could impact 85,000 to 150,000 students, roughly between 8 percent and 14 percent of total student enrollment in the district. School bus drivers are some of the lowest paid and most highly exploited workers in the schools.

The majority of drivers in the country are part time and work for less than \$20 per hour, with many in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the US, making \$17 per hour.

Continuing spread of COVID-19

With a growing summer surge in COVID cases, children and staff are headed into certain mass infections as schools and classrooms reopen without any precautions.

Schools have been well known and documented centers of disease and virus transmission. A recent study published in JAMA Network Open notes that 70.4 percent of about 850,000 US household COVID-19 transmissions originated with a child. Using data collected from 2019 to 2022, the study concludes that children played a significant role in the spread of viral infection within households during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was heightened when schools were in session.

Parroting the lie that schools are the safest places for children, officials in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) have informed parents to send their kids to school sick, effectively advocating for mass infections.

Staffing shortages

The crippling staffing shortage in school districts across the US has rolled over into the new school year. Administrators are implementing band-aid solutions that only worsen overwork and high stress, leading

to a lower quality of education.

There is a major shortage of bus drivers throughout the country, causing many districts to scramble to find a solution. Some districts have cut bus routes, outsourced to rideshare companies, or placing more routes covering multiple school sites onto fewer drivers.

Classes were canceled during the first two weeks of school in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in **Louisville, Kentucky** after a driver shortage caused some students to arrive home around 10 p.m. Schools will remain closed through Thursday of this week.

Classes begin August 21 in **Chicago**. Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the US with 340,000 students, has only half the necessary number of bus drivers for students. The district is offering free public transit passes, but students were only eligible if they signed up prior to the deadline.

In **Montana**, vacancies among teachers and staff have caused multiple districts to transition to a four-day week. This is part of a larger nationwide trend. According to the Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families at the University of Oregon, there are now over 850 school districts in the US who have transitioned to four-day school weeks, up from 650 in 2020.

In **Florida**, most schools reopened on August 10 with over 11,000 teacher and staff vacancies in the state. According to the Florida Education Association, 6,920 teacher vacancies and 5,072 support staff vacancies were advertised as of August 7. Teachers on social media have noted chronic vacancies nationwide, which is producing overcrowded classrooms. During the second half of last school year, more than three-fourths of the states in the US were reporting teaching shortages, with many states highlighting special education and elementary school vacancies as the highest areas of need.

Desperate to fill vacancies, districts are relying more on hiring long-term substitute teachers as well as teachers on emergency permits with little to no teaching experience. Illinois recently issued more emergency teaching permits than full teaching certificates to college graduates.

Bipartisan attack on public education

Budget cuts at the state and federal level have led to massive cuts to teaching staff, services, and schools. The Biden administration will end COVID-19 relief funding in September 2024, which has been a stopgap measure for many school districts to pay teacher and staff salaries and keep schools afloat.

The new bipartisan debt budget deal will mean billions in cuts to public schools. A House Republican subcommittee has also presented a bill to slash 80 percent, or \$15 billion of Title 1 funding to schools. This money is distributed to schools with high numbers of children from low-income families.

The New York City Department of Education alone currently faces nearly \$1 billion in budget cuts. Detroit Community Public School District is carrying out over \$300 million in cuts, which includes mass layoffs of paraprofessionals, Academic Transition Advisors (college counselors) and summer school programs. Houston Independent School District (HISD) will eliminate librarian positions at 28 school sites and turn the libraries into “Team Centers” where students will be sent for behavioral issues.

Lawmakers are also crafting legislation to divert public funds to

private, charter and religious schools through universal voucher programs. These plans allow for the wealthiest families to be reimbursed for sending their children to elite private schools. The bipartisan attack on education is worsening the deep class division that already exists in access to education.

The union bureaucracies

Teachers and school staff want to fight against decades of attacks on wages and working conditions alongside the growing movement of workers across the US and the world. But they are being deliberately sabotaged and isolated district-by-district by the teachers union bureaucrats. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) as well as their state and local affiliates have endorsed one sellout contract after another.

Just over one month ago, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) union in New York City, covering approximately 120,000 teachers, forced through a sellout contract that will last until and November, 2027. The agreement includes annual pay raises set at only 3 percent, far less than inflation. Thousands of educational support workers, including nearly 20,000 paraprofessionals, will continue to make poverty wages of between roughly \$28,000 and \$51,000 annually in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

According to the latest teacher salary benchmark report released by the NEA, the average starting pay for teachers in the US is \$42,000, with over 40 percent of districts, or about 4,700, offering starting pay below \$40,000 for the 2020-2021 school year. The same report estimates that for the 2022-2023 school year, average inflation-adjusted teacher salaries were \$3,644 less than 10 years ago.

Teachers and school workers are heading into an explosive year. To prepare, they must organize themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of the corrupt union bureaucracies, to fight against the corporate looting of school resources and for the right to a quality public education.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact