

“We need to take matters into our own hands”

Mamdani’s decision to reopen New York City schools after blizzard angers teachers and parents

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Tens of thousands of New York City teachers and parents opposed Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s decision to hold in-person school on Tuesday as the city recovered from a historic blizzard.

The area was hit by 27 inches of snowfall last week, crippling the city and making transportation nearly impossible for millions. Most businesses and city services were shut down, and schools were closed on Monday. On Tuesday, millions of workers in the city and commuters in the suburbs were unable to dig their cars out of the snow. Public transportation was unreliable and often unavailable from many areas.

Mamdani, nevertheless, declared that school buildings would be open and teachers and students expected to attend, even though much of the rest of the city was closed.

Attending school was impossible or, in many cases, dangerous, for children and their teachers. Many streets were not fully plowed or sidewalks not cleared. Only 60 percent of students were able to get to school and over 20,000 educators were unable to come in.

Educators and parents voiced their opposition to Mamdani’s decision—and to the leadership of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which had put up no opposition to it—on a variety of online forums as well as a petition that collected over 170,000 signatures.

The petition reads, in part:

Past storms have demonstrated how quickly transportation systems, neighborhood parking,

and yellow bus services become overwhelmed. These conditions create serious safety concerns for students, school staff, and families navigating hazardous roads and limited transit options ... We respectfully urge the New York City Department of Education to prioritize the well-being of students and staff by announcing a temporary shift to remote learning for that day.

Thousands of parents and educators fumed at the decision on social media, and upbraided Mamdani and the UFT leaders.

One parent on Reddit said: “When mayor CEO [former mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg] decided that the most important thing during every snowstorm was to send the kids to babysitting so that the drones could go to work I understood it. I disagreed with it ... but I understood his mentality. When Mr. I’m Gonna Take On The Billionaires decided the same thing it just illustrates the point that where it really counts, he’s not any different than the corporate shills.”

Another wrote: “Why is [UFT President Michael] Mulgrew and his highly paid cronies just going along with whatever the mayor says. There’s plenty of people posting on here saying their blocks have not been plowed, many teachers coming from the island [Long Island] or even Jersey. Thoughts and prayers style emails and posts do nothing.”

The poster called for teachers to “organize an unofficial sick out stand up to the mayor like ... It would

only take one time.”

Another person declared the UFT was, “sitting back, collecting its dues and doing whatever the mayor tells them to do. The union is a joke.”

Another on an educators’ chat on Facebook said, “The mayor should have been told no to in person [education] by our union. Period. End of story. At what point do we take the safety and wellbeing of ourselves AND our students and put them before what the mayor wants?”

Another teacher added: “I am convinced that at this point, administration [of] NYCPS is in the business of crushing teachers’ spirits and stressing them up to the point of heading to an early grave. And our UFT leadership is exactly in bed with the enemy.”

Others called for industrial action organized by educators themselves. “I think we should all stand together,” one teacher said, “and call out. Let’s make a point with action [because] words clearly don’t seem to work.”

Another educator wrote, referring to the recent six-week strike at four city hospitals: “So are we going to strike like the nurses because we have some demands.”

And a third: “They don’t care about us. We need to take matters into our own hands.”

Remarks like these provoked lively responses and discussions.

This anger is not a flash in the pan and reflects a growing conflict between social forces. Educators are outraged over the ICE attacks in Minneapolis and around the country, and fearful that it is only a matter of time before they come to New York City. As with the rest of the United States, New York students have held dozens of walkouts to protest ICE in the last two months.

Online discussions among New York City teachers have raised the question of a general strike to stop Trump’s ICE attacks. Many are aware that trade unions in Minneapolis refused to back a general strike, using “no strike” clauses in their contracts as an excuse. Many expressed no illusion that the UFT would do anything different.

The sentiment is reminiscent of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when a threatened teachers’ sickout in March 2020 forced Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo to shut the schools. The UFT and the American Federation of Teachers played a

crucial role in overriding this opposition. The subsequent reopening, while the pandemic continued to rage, generated deep opposition. De Blasio and his successor, Eric Adams, lied on an almost daily basis that the schools were “the safest places in the city.”

In the two months since taking office, Mamdani has emerged as another right-wing capitalist politician. His unannounced visit to Washington on Thursday, in the aftermath of Trump’s fascistic state of the union rant, amounted to the so-called “socialist” mayor providing political cover for the would-be dictator. This makes him complicit in the assault on immigrants and democratic rights which will inevitably be unleashed in New York City.

Mamdani has, moreover, reappointed Jessica Tisch—architect of mass surveillance—as the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) Police Commissioner, and praised the police, even after a recent shooting of a mentally disabled person in their own home. Legislation is now pending before the City Council that would allow the New York Police Department to restrict the space for protests in front of universities and schools.

The lively discussion of educators about the reopening of schools shows that teachers are confronting how to fight both a “progressive” mayor that many of them voted for, and the UFT bureaucracy.

The way forward is building rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by educators themselves and independent of both the capitalist politicians and the union bureaucracy. Such organizations can unify teachers with parents, students and other sections of the working class, prepare collective action—including coordinated sickouts and broader strike action—and link the fight over immediate safety concerns and other issues to the broader struggle against authoritarianism and austerity.



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