

Reopening of New York City schools threatens massive spread of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic is raging out of control across the United States. Over the past week, 1,442,516 people have tested positive and 16,068 have died. The number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients now stands at 102,148, pushing health care workers beyond their capacity as forecasts project the situation to become ever direr in the coming weeks and months.

Amid this catastrophe, New York City public schools reopened Monday for pre-K to 5th grade, bringing together as many as 200,000 students and staff in confined, poorly ventilated classrooms across the city. Less than three weeks after New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio was compelled to close schools when the citywide test positivity rate surpassed three percent, he has unilaterally reopened them, despite the citywide test positivity rate now exceeding five percent and daily new cases having increased nearly 70 percent in the last two weeks.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has again played the pivotal role in reopening schools. After facilitating the agreement to reopen schools in September, the union bemoaned the fact that they were closed last month and then approvingly retweeted de Blasio's declaration that they would reopen this week.

UFT President Michael Mulgrew published an op-ed Monday in *am NY* titled, "Getting, and keeping, New York's public schools open." He wrote, "The road to reopening New York City's public schools in the face of the coronavirus has been a long and difficult journey, frustrating both parents and teachers." Mulgrew concluded, "Following strict medical guidelines, the city should be able to keep schools open."

Mulgrew is parroting the line advanced by the foremost advocate of reopening schools, the *New York Times*, which wrote Monday, "While the road ahead will be rocky, top public health officials in the city expressed confidence that public schools would remain islands of relative safety."

Nowhere do the Democrats, the UFT, the *Times*, the rest of the corporate media or any of the unprincipled public health officials they bring forward cite any evidence to substantiate

their claim that schools are somehow safe havens where COVID-19 miraculously cannot spread. The reality is that schools have long been recognized by epidemiologists as major centers for viral transmission, and COVID-19 is no exception.

The effects of this policy will be disastrous. Countless teachers, education workers, students and parents will needlessly become infected and die in the coming weeks, while the spread of the pandemic will deepen throughout the region and beyond. Further, the precedent set by the largest school district in the US is accelerating school reopening plans in other major Democratic Party-led cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland and Washington DC, among others.

Numerous scientific studies from the US, South Korea, Italy and throughout the world have proven that children are as likely as adults to contract and transmit COVID-19. They then become vectors for infecting their teachers, parents and other community members. A study published last month in the scientific journal *Nature* identified school closures as one of the most effective policies to contain the pandemic, noting that school closures in the US were "found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent."

The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that as of December 3, 1,460,905 children had been infected with COVID-19 in the US, with 123,688 new cases in the week of November 26 to December 3. There is no federal tracking of COVID-19 outbreaks at schools, but state and district reports compiled by *The COVID Monitor* demonstrate that at least 181,623 students and 76,839 educators have been infected in K-12 schools across the US.

The campaign to open schools is motivated not by any concern for public health, but rather by the profit motive of the capitalist class. The opening of schools is a precondition for compelling parents to return to work, where they face brutal exploitation intended to maximize profits for Wall Street and the financial oligarchy.

At the end of March, the CARES Act was passed with nearly unanimous bipartisan support in order to prevent the

collapse of the stock market. As a result, the Federal Reserve has purchased hundreds of billions of dollars worth of debt from the major corporations, propelling the stock market to all-time highs. Any interruption or abatement of the extraction of surplus value from the working class through the production process threatens to bring down this entire house of cards.

These brutal class imperatives underlie the bipartisan refusal to implement the most basic measures required to contain the pandemic: the closure of all schools and nonessential businesses.

The incoming Biden administration has made it absolutely clear that it will enforce the same reopening policies as the Trump administration. Last Wednesday, Biden stated as a fait accompli, “we’re likely to lose another 250,000 people dead between now and January.” In a separate interview, Biden and incoming Vice President Kamala Harris reiterated the false claim that schools could be reopened safely amid the raging pandemic.

The other primary lie advanced by the Democrats and Republicans to justify the reopening of schools is that they care about the educational needs of children, which have been not been met by remote learning.

What hypocrisy! These same politicians have defunded public education for decades. At present, they are sabotaging remote learning and withholding economic relief in order to impel parents to send their children back to dangerous schools, to in turn force them back into unsafe workplaces.

The *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, published an op-ed Sunday titled, “Students have already lost too much time. They need to be back in classrooms.” The editorial states that “remote learning has failed to provide anything approaching the quality of education that can be delivered by a teacher in a classroom.”

Again, the real motive driving Bezos and the *Post* is to ensure that parents return to work at Amazon and the other major corporations, which have profited handsomely throughout the pandemic. Bezos’ personal wealth has ballooned to \$185 billion, roughly 63 percent higher than it was on March 18.

The processes unfolding in the US are part of a global response by the ruling elites in every country, from Germany to Brazil, India, South Africa and throughout the world.

Confronting the same homicidal policies internationally, the working class must respond with its own global strategy of class struggle. In every country, workers in each industry must form networks of interconnected rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the bourgeois parties and their backers in the unions.

The International Committee of the Fourth International

has assisted autoworkers, educators and other workers to form such committees around the world. In the US, the Socialist Equality Party has worked with teachers, education workers, parents and students to build an Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network, with committees active in New York City, Michigan, Texas, Los Angeles, San Diego, Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

With promising developments in the production and distribution of vaccines, the ruling class demand that schools and nonessential workplaces remain open acquires an increasingly irrational and barbaric character. This must be opposed with the call for a nationwide lockdown and the closure of all schools and nonessential businesses, while all impacted workers must be guaranteed a secure income, housing, medical care and high-quality food.

The alternative presented by the capitalist politicians of either opening schools or leaving students with inadequate remote learning is a false dichotomy. Every child can receive a high-quality online education, but this requires a massive infusion of resources and staffing to provide adequate support for all students. Every student and teacher must be provided with the most advanced technology and high-speed internet.

These demands can be met only through the expropriation of the vast wealth hoarded by the financial oligarchy. Collectively, America’s 614 billionaires have amassed over \$931 billion since the start of the pandemic alone, adding to their trillions accumulated in recent decades.

The objective interests of the working class, in alignment with the principles of medical science and public health, stand diametrically opposed to those of the ruling class. These irreconcilable interests will compel masses of educators, autoworkers, logistics workers, meatpackers and agricultural workers, and all sections of the working class, into struggle in the coming period.

Above all, the fight to close schools and stop the spread of the pandemic entails a political struggle against the entire capitalist system. A revolutionary leadership must be built to guide these coming struggles, and we urge all those who recognize this necessity to make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party today.



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