

Teachers union and Democrats agree to resume in-person learning in New York City schools

By Jerry White
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New York City educators have reacted with horror and anger over the announcement by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) that it has agreed to a plan to reopen the largest school district in the United States by mid-September. The deal with Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio will delay the opening from September 10 to September 16, with a resumption of in-person schooling for hundreds of thousands of children beginning on September 21.

For weeks, educators, parents and students have been denouncing and protesting the reckless and chaotic plans to open schools for more than a million students and 135,000 teachers and support staff. New York City, an earlier epicenter of the pandemic with nearly 24,000 coronavirus-related deaths, is the only large urban district that will open this fall with in-person learning.

With anger reaching a boiling point, UFT President Michael Mulgrew announced last week that the union would seek authorization from union delegates to call a strike as a “last resort.” On Monday evening, the union’s 100-member executive board unanimously backed the proposal, and the delegate assembly, made up of building reps from more than 1,600 schools, was set to vote on Tuesday.

By Tuesday morning, however, Mulgrew and other union leaders appeared at a press conference with de Blasio, along with Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, who said district officials “have been working night and day with our labor partners” to put together the plan. Mulgrew claimed the city had “the most aggressive policies and greatest safeguards of any school system in the United States of America.” The union’s delegate assembly approved the deal Tuesday night by an 82-18 percent margin.

The union officials never intended to wage any serious fight. The same ploy was used by the Detroit Federation of Teachers over the past two weeks. After 91 percent of Detroit teachers voted in favor of a “safety strike,” the DFT announced a deal last week to open the schools under a

hybrid model of in-person and online learning, combined with “hazard pay,” to entice teachers to return to schools in another city that has been an epicenter of the virus.

The claim that the schools can be reopened safely in New York City or anywhere else is a patent lie. Many if not most of the city’s schools are dilapidated and poorly ventilated, making them a vector for the spread of the virus. Under the union-backed plan, 10-20 percent of students and staff will be randomly tested starting on October 1 and only every month thereafter. In his remarks to Tuesday’s delegate assembly, Mulgrew absurdly claimed this partial testing was adequate, stating, “We wanted to test everyone, but our experts said that would only be good for three days. Would’ve made people feel better but would not be effective.”

Rank-and-file teachers immediately denounced the deal on social media and on other outlets. One teacher told the WSWS, “I’m told by my union rep that over 1,000 schools were inspected, and the UFT has enough to bring safety issues to court. That being said they’re telling us, ‘We will see you inside school on the 8th.’ What a sellout!”

In a post on social media, an educator gave voice to the widespread sentiment for a strike, writing, “So, once again, it will be left up to TEACHERS to figure out what the city didn’t figure out in the past 5 months. STOP SELLING US OUT!!! FULL REMOTE OR WE STRIKE!!!”

Another tweeted, “Just to be clear, we never asked for more planning time. We don’t need more planning time, we proved that in March when we established a non-existent curriculum platform in a week. We need safety. We asked for safety measures. This is March all over again.”

Last March, the UFT colluded with de Blasio to conceal the extent of infections and block demands by teachers to close schools, a delay that would cost the lives of at least 121 educators. With the school openings expected to lead to a resurgence of COVID-19, another catastrophe is in the making. This is exacerbated by the fact that New York City

hospitals will not be able to count on out-of-state volunteers this time because hospitals are now overrun with COVID-19 patients across the country.

If this homicidal policy is to be stopped, educators in New York City and other districts must take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the teachers unions, to mobilize the strength of the working class to halt the unsafe opening of schools.

No confidence can be placed in the American Federation of Teachers (the parent organization of the UFT) and the National Education Association, which are opposed to any mass struggle that would expose the anti-working class character of the Democratic Party, particularly on the eve of the presidential elections.

Whatever their rhetorical and tactical differences, both the Democrats and Republicans are fully behind the back-to-school campaign. Getting children back in school, no matter what the cost in lives, is critical from the standpoint of herding workers back into the factories and other workplaces where they can produce the profits demanded by Wall Street.

President Trump, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and Republican governors are most naked in their opposition to science and the use of bullying threats against districts that do not fully open and resistant teachers that do not comply. Last week, Dr. Scott Atlas, Trump's quack doctor brought onto the coronavirus task force because of his support for the murderous "herd immunity" policy, toured Florida schools with Governor Ron DeSantis, saying, "We are the only country of our peer nations in the Western world who are so hysterical about reopening schools. ... We seem to be the only country willing to sacrifice our children out of fear."

Afraid that such statements are only throwing gasoline on volatile teachers and parents, the Democrats have professed their concern about "safe schools" and worked with the trade unions to suppress opposition. On Tuesday, Jill Biden, the wife of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden and a former teacher, began a two-week "Back to School" tour with a stop at a Wilmington, Delaware school. She plans to visit 10 cities, including Grand Rapids, Michigan; Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona and Jacksonville, Florida, where teachers have organized repeated protests and have set up the Duval Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, independent of the unions.

Over the weekend, AFT President Randi Weingarten hosted an online meeting with House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, which, while denouncing Trump and the Republicans, deliberately concealed the role of the Democrats, including de Blasio and the governors of New York, California, Michigan, Hawaii, Colorado and other

states that are forcing teachers and students back to school.

On Wednesday, the AFT is holding a series of "Day of Action" online rallies to promote Biden, whose campaign has already pledged to oversee a regime of austerity that would eclipse the eight years of brutal budget cuts and attacks on teachers that Biden helped carry out under the Obama administration.

The unions falsely present Biden and the Democrats as champions of workers and public education because the Democrats rely on them to suppress strikes and other forms of resistance. In return for this, the Democrats protect the institutional and financial interests of the union apparatus, including the deduction of dues from workers' paychecks that has enabled Weingarten to become a multimillionaire, with an annual salary of more than \$500,000.

Last month, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established to unite and organize opposition to the unsafe opening of schools, independently of the unions. In addition to the Duval Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in Florida, many more are being built in New York, Michigan, Texas, Oklahoma, Hawaii and other states. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is calling on teachers to unite with other sections of workers and actively prepare for a national general strike.

At the same time, these committees demand full funding for internet access, computers and remote-learning, and income protection for parents who must stay at home to care for their children. No return to school must be permitted until there is regular universal testing, the revamping of heating and ventilation systems, a permanent reduction in class sizes and safe school conditions overseen by rank-and-file safety committees answerable to educators, parents and students, not the corporate and financial elites. To pay for this, teachers must demand that the trillions handed over to Wall Street in the CARES Act be redirected to meet social needs.

We urge all those who wish to build a local or statewide rank-and-file safety committee in your area to sign up today and join our Facebook group.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>