

Anger erupting as union paves way to open New York City schools

By Alberto Escalera and Sandy English
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Today many public school educators in New York City will reluctantly return to work to begin preparing for a scheduled school reopening on September 21. New York City is the largest school district in the nation, with more than one million students, and also the largest to start the year with in-person instruction.

Many teachers, no doubt, will boycott the reopening today out of health concerns.

One educator in Queens who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed the sentiments of countless others when she said, “My school is not safe, but they are sending us in anyway. I am 54 years old and have a child, but I feel I have no choice as it is but to go to work. ... The officials from the DOE [Department of Education] do not have to go into these schools.”

There is ample reason to doubt that any school building in the city’s system is safe from spreading the coronavirus. The Department of Education (DOE) notified educators that it would release building safety reports last week, but none have been released as of this writing.

Several walk-throughs by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) officials almost universally report that buildings are unprepared to guarantee the immediate health and safety of educators or students.

The same could be said for the public transportation that hundreds of thousands of students, teachers, aides, and school workers take to school. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s buses and subways have become a notorious vector of the COVID-19 infection. Over 143 transit workers have died from the disease as a result of the betrayal of the Transport Workers Union Local 100, which blocked demands to shut down the system.

There is little assurance that school buses will be any

safer. One driver told the WSWs, “We are taking a risk going back to school. Many of us are older. We don’t have any training. They have only given us one bag of masks and a sanitizer. There are no meetings, just a dry run and start work on September 21.”

The unsafe reopening of the schools is the result of the backroom deal struck last week between UFT President Michael Mulgrew and New York City’s “progressive” Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio. In a repeat of their actions in February and March, the unions and the Democrats—which colluded to conceal information about the spread of the deadly contagion and ignore the demands of teachers to shut down the system—have prepared another catastrophe.

The September 1 deal sparked widespread anger among educators. The deal, which delays the start of in-person learning in New York City public schools by only 11 days, leaves unresolved all the fundamental safety questions raised by educators, students and parents. The UFT executive board authorized a strike vote, and there was a broad expectation that the organization would organize a walkout of the union’s 120,000 members to prevent the unsafe opening of schools.

Under the deal, between 10 and 20 percent of school staff and students will be randomly tested once a month, and this will only start more than a week after schools open. Mulgrew said these and other woefully inadequate measures constituted the “the most aggressive policies and greatest safeguards of any school system in the United States of America.”

Rank-and-file educators have rightfully responded to these claims with scorn and contempt. Even if one accepts the dubious premise that such a small sampling would make contact tracing and containment efforts viable, the burden of accessing test sites is being placed

entirely on students and teachers, who would have to visit centers throughout the city during non-school hours rather than being able to access tests in school facilities.

Similarly, the sellout deal entirely ignores demands raised by teachers and parents to repair or replace inadequate ventilation systems in school buildings and allocate sufficient resources for custodial staff to carry out the nightly “deep cleanings” of facilities being promised.

As part of their cynical attempt to disorient teachers, Mulgrew and other UFT officials spent the days preceding their sellout pact with de Blasio issuing hollow public threats to strike while simultaneously sowing illusions that the courts would protect teachers. The deal struck behind the backs of rank-and-file teachers last Tuesday preempted a strike authorization vote by the union’s delegate assembly scheduled for that same afternoon.

Aiding and abetting the UFT in its betrayal was the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) caucus of the UFT, which includes members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudoleft organizations aligned to the Democratic Party. The group immediately issued a statement hailing the temporary opening delay and taking credit for it.

The caucus circulated a petition praising the “community-minded plan” from Democratic Public Advocate Jumaane Williams that repeats the lie that schools can be open “safely.” The MORE faction also praises the “creative solutions” of Democratic City Council member Mark Treyger and the hollow rhetoric of other city union officials, who are equally as culpable in the bipartisan return-to-work program as the UFT.

On September 3, the City Council Democrats, with Treyger in the lead, held a hearing as part of the damage control in the aftermath of the UFT sellout. Even though the event was meant to assuage parents’ concerns, Dr. Irvin Redlener of Columbia University, an advisor to Mayor de Blasio, told the hearing, “I’m pretty certain we’re going to see a resurgence. There’s too many factors here we can’t control.”

The MORE group is part of a nationwide network of so-called union “reformers” who have increasingly come to prominent positions. This includes top spots in

the Chicago and Los Angeles teachers unions where they have betrayed teacher strikes and imposed the austerity measures of the Democratic Party.

The betrayal of the unions is not simply the product of the corruption and cowardice of the union officialdom. It is the result of their decades of subordination of the needs of workers to capitalism and the demands of the corporate and financial elite. In exchange for imposing the dictates of big business, the unions are granted legal status by the political establishment and the opportunity to collect dues and profit from various business investments. The UFT holds over \$245 million in publicly traded securities as part of its nearly half billion dollars in total assets.

With the reopening of schools, educators must take the protection of their lives into their own hands. This means forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to oversee and enforce safety conditions. These committees must oppose the effort to conceal the truth from the public and expose the spread of infections and unsafe conditions, while protecting whistleblowers from retaliation. They must demand universal and regular testing. If unsafe conditions are present, educators have the right to collectively refuse to work.

There is enormous opposition to this homicidal policy. On Friday, teachers at the Paul D. Schreiber High School in the Port Washington community of Long Island, 18 miles from New York City, walked out on their first day back to protest unsafe conditions. This growing opposition must be united, and preparations made for a general strike to close the schools and protect lives.

We call on all educators, parents and students who want to build a rank-and-file committee contact us today, build the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee Facebook group and make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting on Saturday, September 12.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>