

Teacher protests surge in Southern California as schools reopen

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Amidst the spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in four school districts in Southern California are taking part in courageous protests as opposition by educators to the murderous return-to-school policy of the ruling class unfolds globally. Most notably, Greece has seen hundreds of school occupations in light of the fast increase of the contagion.

Educators in at least four Orange County unified school districts—Newport-Mesa, Irvine, Saddleback Valley, and Los Alamitos—are standing firm in opposition to returning to work under unsafe conditions, defying their own unions' recommendations with Los Alamitos teachers set to strike September 29.

Ten out of 29 school districts in the county have either recently reopened or are reopening this week following Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom's "Blueprint for a Safer Economy" order as well as clearance from local authorities, which have allowed schools to reopen when the number of reported cases drops under what are deemed "safe" thresholds.

Kindergarteners entering Greentree Elementary School in Irvine

Orange County is typically perceived as a wealthy area south of Los Angeles. It is, however, plagued by increasing social inequality and homelessness. According to the 2015 Orange County Community Indicators report, the county registered 24 percent of the population living in poverty, including 120,000 children, and with a whopping 41 percent of neighborhoods having a high concentration of families experiencing financial instability. More than 32,000 students are homeless or housing insecure, an increase of 236 percent in the last 10 years. The conditions today are undoubtedly worse than five years ago.

In Orange County, which reports a death toll of more than 1,200, the alleged new COVID-19 case rate is 4.7 per 100,000 population and the positivity rate is 3.9 percent. However, it has been widely reported that the county's health care agency has kept outbreaks secret, concealing the real numbers. This is not a coincidence, as California is among those states not providing any district-level data on COVID-19 outbreaks in K-12 schools. In recent days, at least one college in the county had an outbreak, but officials refused to release any information.

Teachers at Los Alamitos High School are planning a strike on Tuesday, September 29, to oppose the school's reopening. Their concern is primarily lack of safety, especially due to inadequate air ventilation. Most of the school's windows do not open and doors open to indoor corridors. Last Friday, the district supplied a few

HEPA filters. However, they have not even been installed and would not solve the issue of proper air ventilation.

Irvine High School

The school district immediately responded to the strike threat by hiring substitute teachers. The California Teachers Association is highly concerned that this strike could escape its control and set a statewide and nationwide precedent. Therefore, it will doubtlessly try to either avert it through maneuvers that would have no concrete effect on safety, or try to isolate it and disarm it.

It is significant that last August the Los Alamitos Unified School District laid off 300 staff effective mid-October. Superintendent Andrew Pulver said that there was not enough work for the classified employees due to schools not being open. He now is pushing teachers to show up on Tuesday, denying their concerns about air circulation, sanitation and its frequency or the absence of space to maintain social distancing. This was the first Orange County school district to be granted a waiver to reopen.

Last Thursday, Irvine Unified School District (IUSD) opened up its fall term, with teachers, parents and students signing a petition protesting the unsafe reopening. In two days, it achieved 2,000 signatories. The Concerned IUSD Teachers have been warning of the dangers of the hybrid model, urging that the district commit to distance learning in the secondary schools for the fall semester.

Students lining up in the morning at Greentree Elementary

This action is in opposition to their union, the Irvine Teachers Association (ITA), affiliated with the California Teachers Association (CTA) and National Educators Association (NEA), which endorsed the unsafe guidelines put forward by state and local authorities.

The teachers stressed the urgency of the situation by pointing out that several families had already tested positive for COVID-19. Their children are enrolled at multiple schools in the district, from elementary up to high school level.

The Concerned IUSD Teachers' statement explained the drawbacks of the hybrid model. It expressed two concerns. First, the quality of hybrid in-person instruction at the secondary level will be inferior to the distance-learning model. Second, resuming in-person instruction will jeopardize the safety of students, staff, and families.

"The hybrid model creates environments that are antithetical to learning," said the statement, citing the fact that students will only be on campus two days a week and only see each of their teachers once a week. Teachers, however, will still be on campus four days

a week. According to CDC and state guidelines, students would have to remain seated for the entire class period, all facing the same direction, wearing masks, and not working closely with classmates or their teacher. Group collaboration would need to be done online to facilitate this. Talking would have to be minimized in class because COVID-19 is aerosolized. This is practically impossible and would compromise safety.

The statement also builds a case in favor of distance learning as a more effective instructional strategy. The fundamental danger of the hybrid model stems from exposing students and teachers to the deadly virus. Disruptions will be caused by the forced quarantine of exposed teachers and students. This danger is intensified by the absence of a district-wide testing program, leading inevitably to infected students and staff coming onto campus and spreading the virus. Additionally, social distancing is insufficient with many classrooms slated to have up to 20 students at a time.

Teachers, students and parents signing the petition published powerful statements in opposition to the reopening.

An IUSD teacher wrote: “The rush to the hybrid model is the worst of both worlds: in terms of both safety and good education. ... The lack of a real and on-site testing and contact-tracing program is a huge flaw in this scheme. When you combine that with the huge flaws in the hybrid instructional model, the negatives should be glaring and were never adequately addressed.”

Sounding a similar tone, a parent wrote: “It is reckless to open schools during this stage of the pandemic. If schools were to open during this time, it would not only be detrimental to everyone’s physical health, but mental health as well. Constantly being in fear of catching this deadly disease and bringing it home to their families is something that will affect a student’s ability to learn, as well as a teacher’s ability to teach. Keep schools online for the sake of the physical and mental health of all students and faculty members.”

An IUSD student wrote: “I originally thought by choosing hybrid, I would go at a time when it’s completely safe AKA end of first semester because my mom is immunocompromised. I want to come back at a time where it is ABSOLUTELY SAFE. Additionally, hybrid learning will hinder my ability to learn especially because there won’t even be as much social interaction. There is no point in going back to school this early if there will be no socialization including lunches or before school.”

A community member wrote: “I am a physician scientist and agree that in-person instruction places students, families, teachers and other community members at significant risk without the availability of widespread testing and a vaccine to help develop herd immunity. ... Unless appropriate safety measures and support systems are in place, it is premature to begin in-person learning. We are already seeing the negative effects of opening some schools and colleges.”

One IUSD teacher described her teaching experiences on Facebook. “I have two classrooms across from each other to house each half of my class. I have an aide to support supervision (though she is a credentialed teacher from out of state).” Essentially, she is team teaching and is able to switch groups with her partner. Custodians sanitize the classrooms several times

during the day, and everyone is washing their hands multiple times.

“Each classroom is equipped with an air purifier that cleans the air every 30 min. Each classroom also has a hospital filter, and the HVAC system has been modified to take in fresh air/cool/then circulate.”

A similar statement was issued by teachers at the Saddleback Valley Unified School District, which emphasized similar issues, primarily safety and the inefficacy of the hybrid model.

Similarly, three-quarters of the Newport-Mesa USD teachers voiced their firm opposition to the district’s safety protocols that were agreed to by the union. Educators voiced their concerns against the Newport-Mesa Federation of Teachers (NMFT), whose President Tamara Fairbanks explicitly outlined the union’s role in school reopening, “We want to go back to school. We just want to go back safely.”

In a similar statement, the NMFT declared: “We look forward to the return of our students to our schools and thank you for your commitment to safety. Students can and will rise to our expectations with support and encouragement from all of us.”

The pandemic is being used by the ruling class and its state agencies in multiple ways: first, to cut jobs and benefits, then to reopen unsafely for the purpose of freeing parents to return to work. These criminal policies threaten the lives teachers, students and their families.

We urge all educators to take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file safety committees on the model of those already founded in cities like New York and Los Angeles, as well as states like Texas and Florida. These committees will establish the basis for a united struggle of workers across the country and prepare for a general strike. Not an ounce of trust can be given to the unions or either big business political party or agency that seeks to expose lives to the deadly risk posed by the coronavirus.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>