

A wave of teacher protests spark staffing shortages and school closures across the US

By Emma Arceneaux
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School districts across the US are confronting a wave of opposition from teachers and other education staff as they continue to herd students back to campus amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. According to an independent K-12 aggregate, the COVID Monitor, which tracks cases from school and district reports and verified public reports, there have been 31,584 confirmed cases among staff and students as of September 27. In addition to protests and work actions, states across the US are facing severe teacher and substitute vacancies. Teacher resignations, absences, and walkouts in addition to increasing outbreaks among students and staff are forcing schools to switch back to remote learning, at least temporarily.

Arkansas | Cases: 82,755; Deaths: 1,350

In a brave act of protest, at least 166 teachers in Little Rock, Arkansas refused to go to school for in-person learning on Monday. The teachers, under the representation of the Little Rock Education Association (LREA), are demanding that the school district switch to remote-only instruction, citing safety concerns, inadequate cleaning, inconsistent case reporting, and increasing COVID-19 cases in the district and statewide.

The union has since backed off the demand, after blowback from the school district. Sixty-nine of the teachers who had supported the action received notice they would be disciplined.

In the district, there have been thirty-three positive cases among students and six among staff since September 21. Another 190 have been quarantined. Two schools have had to move to online-only instruction temporarily due to cases. Statewide, there are 717 active cases in K-12 schools and 36 schools are under 'modified instruction' due to the pandemic, of which 26 only began instruction last week.

California | Cases: 818,000; Deaths: 15,971

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 who were set to strike September 29. Very little information has been published as to the status of the strike.

In advance of the prospect of teachers not showing up on Tuesday, the board passed an emergency resolution authorizing the hiring of substitute teachers. The board already had 20-30 substitutes 'in-house' including counselors, administrators and assistant principals from the district's schools.

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.

Colorado | Cases: 70,458; Deaths: 2,058

School districts in Colorado are facing a massive substitute teacher

shortage. In Alamosa School District, the substitute pool has decreased by half, down to only 25 teachers. Denver Public Schools, the largest district in the state, has also lost about half of its substitute pool due to health and safety concerns.

The *Colorado Sun* reports that one district has resorted to asking parents to volunteer as substitutes. Other districts are turning to their own teachers, staff and administrators. Alamosa is offering teachers a paltry \$25 dollars to forego their planning periods to cover other classrooms. Many schools worry that a single coronavirus case could lead to a temporary closure.

Georgia | Cases: 300,000; Deaths: 6,836

On September 17, teachers in Fulton County used their lunch break to protest the district's plan to return to in-person instruction. Around thirty teachers at Riverwood High School walked out during lunch. Disparate reports have down that dozens or more teachers at multiple other schools in the district also walked out in solidarity. French teacher Brett Edeker, referring to the illegality of collective bargaining and strikes by public employees in Georgia, said, "We're trying to play within the rules of our job, we're fearful of retaliation, so we're trying to do it at a time that doesn't impact students."

A survey conducted by the district found that 83 percent of teachers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that schools should remain online for the foreseeable future; 72 percent of staff felt the same. In a letter to employees of the district, Superintendent David Dude acknowledged the overwhelming lack of support by teachers and staff for a return to in-person instruction but suggested this was due to an erroneous lack of trust in the district's consideration of the current data about the virus.

Addressing the concern among teachers, consistently voiced by educators across the country, that concurrent teaching (of both in-person and online instruction) would be extremely taxing, Dude callously said, "Of course we can find examples where it is not going well, but since when do we focus on the poor exemplars?"

Hawaii | Cases: 12,436; Deaths: 133

Already facing a teaching shortage before the pandemic, the situation in Hawaii as accelerated dramatically. Dozens of teachers are taking medical leave this year. In a Facebook group dedicated to safe school re-openings, teachers have commented on an advertisement for teaching positions in Hawaii. One comment reports that the Board of Education and the Department of Education have begun hiring high school graduates to be substitute teachers. Another reads that the ad should include "Warning: full disclosure of coronavirus occurrences may or may not be given in your district. And you must bring your own gloves."

Dayna Inouye, 49, a school clerk at Dole Middle School in Hawaii, died last Wednesday of the virus. Inouye is from a family of school teachers. She leaves behind three daughters and her partner of 27 years.

Nearly 200 of Inouye's fellow teachers and educators spoke out on the

conditions they face at schools at a local school board meeting held online and partially made public in the aftermath of Inouye's tragic death. More than 100 gave written testimony, which has been compiled by the HSTA and is publicly available.

Kansas | Cases: 59,921; Deaths: 650

Baldwin City United School District (USD 348) is facing a teacher and substitute shortage so severe that it may have to shut down as a result. Many staff members are quarantined but the district only has four substitutes remaining. Superintendent Paul Dorathy sent a message to parents and staff explaining that substitutes are not taking jobs right now because they are, "concerned for their own health." He added that in addition to substitutes, they are shortages with cooks, secretaries, and bus drivers.

Louisiana | Cases: 167,000; Deaths: 5,490

East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators is calling for school employees to take next Monday off, in order to prompt better cleaning and sanitizing of school buildings. In a survey they conducted, 82 percent of teachers supported the call for "a day of action." Announcing the planned action on Facebook, local union president Anita Augustus declared, "We do not like to take a day of action, because it inconveniences our parents... but we do not want a single child or adult to get COVID because things were not sanitized."

This action will coincide with the district moving elementary students from two to five days per week in-person instruction. No matter what cleaning protocols the district ends up committing to, students and staff will be at risk for contracting the disease if they are in classrooms.

Last week, hundreds of teachers in Livingston Parish participated in a similar day of action to protest unsafe conditions. Neither the statewide Louisiana Federation of Teachers nor the Louisiana Association of Educators worked to combine these two struggles.

Maryland | Cases: 125,000; Deaths 3,946

Carroll County Public Schools officials have stated that nearly 300 teachers have put in leave requests ahead of the district's plans to resume in-person instruction on October 19. The district is scrambling to hire substitute teachers and are also assigning other employees to classrooms as well as hiring temporary workers.

Mississippi | Cases: 97,638; Deaths: 2,957

Long Beach Middle School in Long Beach, Mississippi is in quarantine after more than a dozen students contracted the virus. The entire student body will be quarantined for two weeks after "35 percent either tested positive or were exposed" according to a statement by health officials. This follows the closure of Biloxi High School in late August due to similar circumstances.

As of September 25, there have been 2,776 confirmed cases of the virus in K-12 schools, 1,836 among students, and 940 among staff. There have been over 20,000 quarantined as a result. These numbers are incomplete because the Mississippi Department of Health is only collecting infection data from between 720 and 861 of the 1,063 schools in the state.

New York | Cases: 248,000; Deaths: 23,814

Students in New York City returned to campus in the largest school district in the country this week. Rank-and-file teachers at Hunter College Campus Schools, an elite K-12 school administered by the City University of New York, voted to authorize a strike to protest unsafe conditions on Tuesday. The school has very few windows and a history of ventilation problems.

The Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the local union, quickly stepped in to prevent this independent action by the teachers. After the strike was

voted on, CUNY agreed to allow an independent inspection of the building, which included, according to a spokesperson, "representatives from the PSC Chapter, CUNY Central Office, Hunter College and a health and safety specialist from the American Federation of Teachers. They corroborated what we have been saying all along: That the school is ready and safe for occupancy."

PSC sent teachers back to the classroom on Tuesday, declaring a "win" for the minor concessions made by CUNY including "regular" COVID testing and the installation of HEPA air filters in the windowless classrooms.

North Carolina | Cases: 209,000; Deaths: 3,511

Two schools in Cumberland County, NC will be closed for "deep-cleaning" after multiple staff tested positive for the virus. Despite all students learning remotely, staff and faculty have had to work on campus. District officials are seeking to place blame on the staff themselves, saying that they don't believe the virus was spread on campus. "We know that employees, they often times over the weekend and throughout the week, they go other places. So, when they come back to the building, if they are positive, in many cases, depending on who they are around at the school building, they may have to be quarantined as well," a spokesperson for the school district said.

Texas | Cases: 781,000; Deaths: 15,994

Teachers at Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Austin, Texas made a pledge not to return to school on October 5, when students are scheduled to return to campus. Dozens of cars drove to the district's headquarters on September 26th to protest the reopening. An anonymous teaching assistant told local news KXAN, "I am curious to see how they will continue working without a lot of the staff and teachers. I am seeing a lot of resignations. I am seeing good teachers leaving because they are not giving these choices."

With less than a week before students return, the district is also behind on processing medical accommodation requests from teachers and staff who want to continue working from home. As of Monday, there were 472 pending requests.

At the same time, the AISD's Chief Business Officer Larry Thorn stated at Monday's school board meeting that enrollment was down by 5,000, which could lead to the district laying off around 230 teachers and staff.

Texas has confirmed 3,720 cases among K-12 students and 3,053 among staff since schools reopened in August.

Wisconsin | Cases: 127,000; Deaths: 1,312

Staffing shortages caused by the pandemic have led Adams Elementary School in Janesville to move to fully virtual instruction until October 9. The school does not have enough staff for in-person instruction after multiple teachers were quarantined.

This follows an independent sickout by teachers in Kenosha earlier this month that forced seven schools in the district to switch to remote-only instruction for a week. Over 270 teachers called in sick, and the local union, Kenosha Education Association, refused to voice support for the action despite its president advocating in-person only instruction.

While the number of cases in K-12 schools is unclear, the Wisconsin Department of Health has reported that 206 schools, universities or daycares have had two or more confirmed cases. *USA Today* reported that "since Wisconsin students returned to K-12 and college classrooms in late August and early September, the state has repeatedly set new single-day and seven-day records for confirmed cases and the percent of new tests that have come back positive for COVID-19."

For a unified fight of teachers, students, and education workers!

There is a powerful will to fight against the homicidal drive to reopen for in-person learning among educators, and other school staff. What is missing is a unified, conscious political orientation of these struggles against this bi-partisan policy of the ruling class. The teacher's unions, when they get involved, have acted only to isolate and dissipate protests, rather than combine and coordinate them on a nation-wide scale.

The National Educators Rank-and-File Committee calls on all educators, parents, and students to join our fight to unite these struggles independent of the unions and both big business parties. Form local, independent committees to prepare for a nationwide mobilization to halt and reverse the unsafe reopening and to defend public education more broadly.

We urge readers to take up the fight to save lives by contacting us to begin forming a committee in your district or state.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>