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Brooklyn march: Stop unsafe school reopening plan!

written by Greg Butterfield
August 23, 2020







Brooklyn, N.Y. — A protest led by Black and Brown teachers and students drew hundreds of people to Grand Army Plaza on Aug. 20. Their call was to “oppose unsafe opening of New York public schools.” Organizers provided masks, hand sanitizer, water and snacks to those who needed them.

Solidarity with the mass movement to defend Black lives from police terror was central to the action. Many signs demanded “Defund the NYPD, fund public schools” and “Police out of schools.”

Speakers called out the racist character of the city’s plan to reopen schools for in-person classes on Sept. 10. The unsafe conditions would fall on the backs of Black and Brown communities and working-class families, where and with whom the vast majority of public school students live.

Special education teacher Amy Tan works at a school in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park neighborhood, where the infection rate is now 7 percent. Tan described a “climate of fear” in the multinational neighborhood, which has also been terrorized by the threat of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids.

“Are we going to ask our students to go into these conditions that have been defunded for decades?” she asked. “No!” shouted the crowd.

Earlier this year, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard

Carranza delayed closing schools while the virus spread, until a virtual mutiny by teachers, students and parents forced them to do so in late March. Some protesters held signs with the names and photos of teachers who died from COVID-19.

The city was hard-hit by the pandemic in the spring, with hundreds dying daily, mostly in Black and Brown communities. Lockdown measures finally brought down the death rate by June.

But the uncontrolled spread of the virus throughout the rest of the U.S. now threatens a new surge here. Infection rates were rebounding by mid-August in neighboring states and in some Brooklyn neighborhoods.

All summer, school workers, students and parents have argued that de Blasio's plan to reopen public schools in September is not only inadequate, rushed and underfunded, but downright dangerous for the community. Today, New York is the [only major school system in the country](#) that plans in-person classes for the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

Some smaller school systems across the U.S. that began in-person classes, as well as some colleges and universities, have been swiftly forced to shut down as COVID-19 continues to spread. A [growing number of studies](#) show that young people can spread the virus and become seriously ill.

On Aug. 20, United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew said that city [teachers could strike](#) if they feel returning to work is unsafe, despite the state's anti-union Taylor Law, which prohibits strikes by public employees. Mulgrew's announcement came after unions representing principals, cafeteria workers, janitors and administrative workers joined the teachers in demanding a delay in reopening schools.

Tax big business

One chant at the Brooklyn protest was, “We need money for education! We don’t have soap or ventilation!”

This reflects the reality of New York’s underfunded, overcrowded and often decrepit school facilities — a reality that cannot be hidden from the parents, students and school workers who have struggled daily with the lack of basic supplies, inadequate medical staffing and unhealthy classrooms, even before the coronavirus.

Speakers at Grand Army Plaza demanded that the government tax the wealthy and big business to provide an income for everyone to stay at home until a vaccine is available and school facilities can be adequately renovated. They said the Department of Education should focus on making sure all teachers and students have adequate equipment and training for remote learning.

They pointed out that de Blasio’s stubborn refusal to delay reopening schools is actually driven by Wall Street’s desire to make parents return to work (also in dangerous conditions).

Meanwhile, according to the [Movement Of Rank-and-File Educators \(MORE-UFT\)](#), New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo plans to cut the public education budget by 20 percent, firing 20,000 school workers statewide. Cuomo has refused calls to tax billionaires and stop giveaways to big business in order to fund essential services.

Protesters marched south through Prospect Park, fired up with chants led by young activists, and were greeted by many families and workers along the way. They ended with a rally in front of Chancellor Carranza’s home, vowing to keep organizing and protesting for the safety of students, school workers and their communities.

SLL photos: Greg Butterfield

