

As omicron surges: Teachers, students resist dangerous school conditions

written by Greg Butterfield
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Students at Lower East Side Prep High School joined a citywide walkout for COVID safety in New York, Jan. 11. Photo: Shawn Garcia

Jan. 12 - Members of the Chicago Teachers Union [voted to take classes remote](#) for several days in defiance of the city administration. Thousands of New York City students [walked out of classes](#) to protest unsafe conditions. Furious staff, youth and families from [Oakland, California](#), to [Columbia, Missouri](#), and [Boston](#) are demanding the return of remote learning options, increased testing and safety measures in schools.

We all remember Donald Trump's racist, anti-immigrant slogan, "Build that wall." Now the Biden administration and its allies in the corporate media have "built a wall" of dangerous denial around the spread of COVID-19's omicron variant in public schools across the U.S. And teachers, school staff, students and families are fighting back.

Along with healthcare and retail workers, school workers and students have been on the frontlines of the pandemic since early 2020 - never more so than today. Crammed into overcrowded classrooms without adequate ventilation, testing or PPE, schools are omicron superspreaders - ones that federal, state and local officials insist remain open despite all evidence to the contrary. Why?

Advocates for keeping schools open and denying a remote option cite "learning loss" as their primary reason. But in cities like New York, home of the country's largest public school system, so many thousands of students and teachers are sick that [little learning is going on](#) in most classrooms. In many schools, students who come in are packed into even more dangerous conditions - like auditoriums and lunchrooms - because so many peers and staff members are out sick.

As enraged teachers and students have been saying for weeks, most want to teach and learn in a classroom environment. But that can only happen when it is safe to do

so. Withholding remote options and safety measures during a pandemic surge is the greatest source of “learning loss” as [parents keep their children home](#) and many students and teachers fall ill.

Childhood infections and [hospitalizations have skyrocketed](#) since mid-December. Omicron is a variant of COVID-19 that is highly transmissible and often results in “breakthrough cases” among those who are already vaccinated. But officials have only gotten more dug in about keeping schools open, without any remote option.

It’s not just pro-Trump anti-maskers who are responsible. Some of the worst offenders are Democratic allies of the Biden administration, including incoming New York Mayor Eric Adams and his predecessor, Bill de Blasio, and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who locked teachers out of their remote classrooms.

The real reason – which is becoming clearer to more and more workers – is that the capitalist economy demands it. Profit-hungry capitalists find their businesses short staffed. Keeping schools open is a way to force parents to come to work, often in unsafe conditions. The health of the community – including elders, people with chronic illnesses, and younger children who have not yet been approved for vaccination – is not a priority for the capitalists and their bought-and-paid-for politicians.

Baltimore: a case study

Baltimore, a predominantly Black city, is a case study in what is happening around the country, including larger cities like Chicago and New York.

The school superintendent and Democratic city administration refused to heed the Baltimore Teachers Union, which asked them to act preemptively to protect teachers, students and the community before the scheduled return to classrooms following the year-end holiday break.

On Dec. 22, BTU President Diamonte Brown said: "There is much we do not yet know, but what is clear is that transmissions are at record levels and vaccination does not eliminate infection. It is prudent and necessary for City Schools to consider all possibilities.

"However, there have only been minimal changes to the status quo and we have not heard of any contingency plans that could be enacted if circumstances continue to worsen."

The union quickly laid out a clear course of action and preparation, calling on the city to open the winter session remotely and delay in-person schooling while testing and safety measures are put in place.

Instead, the Baltimore City officials plowed forward with reopening, with no plan, minimal testing and resulting chaos.

Baltimore activist Sharon Black of the Unemployed Workers Union told Struggle-La Lucha: "The community is outraged. It's been up to teachers to raise money to provide N95 and KN95 masks, and not a thing has been discussed in terms of safety on buses at school rush hour - either for drivers or students."

The School Board and Baltimore City Health Department claim they will have testing in place and possibly completed by the end of January - after schools have already been back in session and spreading COVID for weeks. School staff have reiterated that many air filters and purifiers are in need of further maintenance.

"It is profits before people that is driving this criminal neglect of the health of young people and teachers. 'Get kids back to school, so parents can make money for bosses' is their motto," Black added.

Role of Biden and the CDC

The Biden administration has encouraged this dangerous behavior, with the president repeatedly saying that schools should remain open.

Biden's Centers for Disease Control issued new guidelines Dec. 27 cutting the quarantine period for infected people from 10 to 5 days, citing "societal impact" (e.g., critical infrastructure and staffing shortages) as a major reason.

Even former Surgeon General Jerome Adams, a Trump appointee, advised against following the new CDC guidance, saying people should get a negative test before leaving isolation. Adams [called the change](#) "a compromise to keep the economy open in the face of inadequate tests."

Shortly after the CDC altered its guidelines to benefit bosses at the expense of public health, it also issued a report that COVID infection may [increase the danger of diabetes in children](#) - a chronic, lifelong and potentially fatal condition that requires expensive maintenance drugs.

[The Movement of Rank and File Educators \(MORE-UFT\)](#) in New York pointed out the Biden administration's hypocrisy, noting that on Jan. 2, as schools were about to resume in-person classes, the White House press briefing room was being reduced to only 14 seats due to concerns about omicron. "Cool, cool, but 30 kids in a classroom is fine."

In truth, what we are seeing is Trump's vision of mass infection unimpeded by public health measures taking shape under Biden and the "anti-Trump" Democrats. Because the capitalist class demands it, and both Republicans and Democrats at bottom exist to serve their interests.

The more Biden, Adams, Lightfoot & Co. barrel ahead endangering the lives of workers and their children, the more resistance they will face, and the more people will become aware that neither Democrats or Republicans can be relied on to

protect their most basic rights.

Only independent organization in the spirit of the rebellious Chicago teachers and New York students can defend the lives and health of the people!

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