

Brooklyn, N.Y., teachers demand 'safety not swagger'

written by Greg Butterfield
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SLL photos: Greg Butterfield

Around 100 teachers, students and parents rallied at the Barclays Center sports arena in downtown Brooklyn, New York, Jan. 5 to demand real health and safety protections for public school communities throughout New York City. The action was organized by the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE-UFT), a progressive faction of the United Federation of Teachers.

Signs and banners alerted onlookers that “NYC schools are not safe!” MORE-UFT activist Annie Tan, a special education teacher in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park neighborhood, led chants of “Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe!”

Speakers condemned the new mayoral administration of former cop Eric Adams and his predecessor Bill de Blasio for denying students and teachers a remote learning option during the surging COVID-19 omicron variant sweeping the city.

Before the December holiday break, omicron was spreading rapidly through city schools. Both the outgoing and incoming Democratic administrations refused to take measures to ensure the safety of school communities upon the resumption of classes on Jan. 3, and rejected numerous calls to postpone in-person classes to give time for all students and workers to be tested.

Many community members told horror stories from their own schools: sick children being sent to classes due to lack of testing and the Department of Education’s lack of communication with non-English-speaking parents; high numbers of teacher absences meaning students are crammed into auditoriums, further heightening the risk of spread; illness of food preparation workers leaving teachers scrambling to feed lunch to hungry kids.

Mayor Adams boasted of “New York swagger” as a reason to force students and teachers back into the school petrie dish. A sign held high by an African American

teacher at the Jan. 5 rally responded succinctly: “Safety not swagger.”

Unfortunately, UFT President Michael Mulgrew has been collaborating with the city administration in covering up the extent of the crisis and refusing to listen to the demands of the union’s members and the broader school community.

MORE-UFT members held a follow-up action at UFT headquarters on Jan. 11, demanding action from the union leadership.

MORE-UFT demands include: KN95 or N95 for students, faculty and staff; weekly testing for all staff and students, and result data to be shared; repair or replace insufficient ventilation systems; student absences excused if parents choose to keep children home during the surge; and remote learning options.

New York residents are urged to call the city’s information hotline 311 and say: “I am very concerned about COVID safety in NYC public schools. I believe weekly testing of all staff and students is the only way to keep schools safe.”





