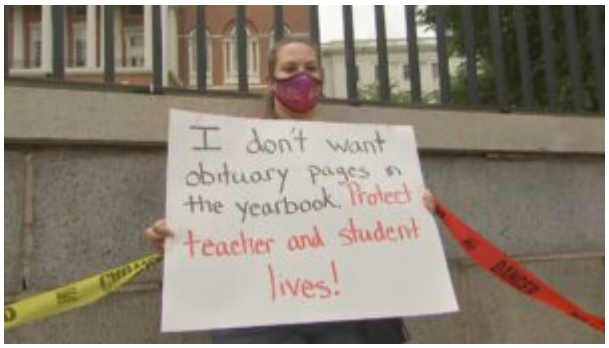
School Reopening Fights Reveal Bitter Truths of Economic System

written by C.R. Mills | November 17, 2020



In recent months, school reopening fights have increasingly been framed as a battle between parents and teachers. Parents need to get back to work and need schools to reopen to do so, or they're already back to work and can't find or afford anyone to watch their children. Yet teachers and their unions refuse due to misplaced fear of illness, misguided priorities, or just plain laziness – or so the story goes. A high-profile recent example of this framing comes from San Francisco, where Mayor London Breed falsely and cynically claimed that the local school district was working on renaming schools in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests at the expense of spending time developing a reopening plan, causing parents to suffer in the process.

The fight represents a case study in our economic system pitting two groups of people with far more common interests than differences against each other in order to obscure the problems within the system itself.

It's Not Parents' Fault

Forcing parents back to work in the midst of global pandemic and putting them, their families, and their communities at risk of illness and death in the process is baldly immoral. There may indeed be a very few select jobs that must continue on throughout the pandemic to ensure our collective survival, including growing our food and providing our health care. Beyond that, the vast majority of people are going back to work because they are given no choice – they either return, or lose their means of providing their family food and shelter.

Despite our country's vast wealth, our economic system does not guarantee our citizens survival. Instead, survival is directly tied to the ability to work and contribute to the economy. We like to pretend that the "decision" to work is a choice, but the pandemic has exposed that lie. People are forced to work to survive, even when working exposes them to a brutal virus that has already killed hundreds of thousands of people.
Ultimately, the pandemic has forced parents to choose between work and health, between a paycheck and taking care of their kids. They're being forced to make this decision because businesses in this country don't want to stop making money, and without workers, they can't.

Of course, our government could step in and ensure families survive despite their inability to work. A massive chunk of parents upset their children can't go to school would simply not be upset if they were given the option to stop working during the pandemic, provided enough money to pay their bills, and a guarantee that they'd have a job to return to when the pandemic ends.

Instead, however, these parents are left out in the cold, often turning their anger towards not towards an uncaring economic system or an unresponsive government, but to teachers – teachers who are often in the exact same situation as parents themselves.

It's Not Teachers' Fault

While parents are being asked to return to unsafe work environments, so are teachers – work environments, in fact, extremely likely to quickly spread COVID-19. Teachers must return to enclosed rooms, usually lacking ventilation or air circulation systems able to reduce risk of COVID-19 spread through providing classrooms fresh air. Teachers and students must stay in these classrooms for the majority of their day with a group of children who struggle with using the primary strategy for prevention science agrees upon – wearing a mask. And these teachers are often given little to no guarantee that the children they're teaching do not have the coronavirus. Testing remains sparse and underfunded, contact tracing the same, and most screening systems rely on the flawed strategy of taking temperatures and trusting whatever parents tell the school about their child's health.

In a mirror image of what parents must face, teachers must return to work or lose their jobs. They're being asked to do so not necessarily because it's the best thing for children, but because the economic system we live in demands that parents have childcare so they can work. Being a parent and spending your days raising your children, it seems, has no real economic value in our current system, so we don't pay parents to do it. Teachers fill the gap as a massive source of subsidized child care that allows parents to reproduce while continuing to produce profit for business owners.

Again, workers certainly exist who need someone to watch their children while they perform the essential tasks necessary to keep people alive. Some teachers should indeed go back to work. But teachers should be able to decide for themselves if they are willing to take the risk of doing so, not be forced to simply because their school district tells them to. In addition, those that do want to return to work to care for and educate children should be promised that the institution they're working for will provide every resource necessary to reduce risk of illness. That means new and improved ventilation systems, extensive testing and contact tracing resources, expanded spaces in which to teach, and any other resource a teacher might need to prevent contracting COVID-19.

These measures would not just benefit teachers, but the entire community in which the children who need to go to school live. Children who spread the coronavirus amongst each other and then send it back to multiple homes in their communities put all residents at risk. Adults working at schools who then spread the virus further in their interactions with other adults outside of their work environment do the same.
Teachers do in fact want what's best for their communities. Yet in the tired logic of an economic system that forces everyone to fight for their own survival, we see teachers pitted against parents instead of these groups uniting as natural allies in the fight for safer and healthier communities.

It's the System's Fault

The pandemic has revealed some bitter truths about capitalism.

First off, in our current economic system, our employers don't really care about us. This system wants profit above all other outcomes, and ultimately, it's willing to put all of us – parents, teachers, children, workers of all kinds – at risk in order to do so. Our economic system will not tolerate slow-downs of any kind, even if the slow-downs occur to keep people from dying. We are ultimately only valuable in terms of our ability to work, and if we can't, our means of survival will be taken from us.

Second, our government has become mostly uninterested in protecting us from an economic system in which our survival is entirely contingent on our ability to work. Early in the pandemic, the federal government sought to provide money to workers to compensate for their inability to work. Those attempts have largely dried up, and they may not be revived. Government has largely ceded the provision of our means of survival to corporations, and even if corporations aren't willing to provide that survival, we can't expect the public sector to step in and do so.

Third, capitalism will use any tool available to pit workers against each other. Parents and teachers both find themselves in hopeless situations through no fault of their own, and are being encouraged to turn their anger upon each other. It's a well-tested and reliable strategy that's been used over and over with race, gender, and sexuality – while the specifics change, the strategy remains the same.

Finally, Democrats won't save us from the current situation. We need look no further than Mayor London Breed for proof. Centrist, corporate-funded Democrats have accepted the premise that corporations should rule our economy, and that government's job should simply be to ensure these corporations have a ready supply of workers to keep profits flowing. Schools should reopen, they argue, and they'll certainly claim it's best for kids in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. Yet school reopenings are really not about kids – they're about the economy. Politicians like Breed will continue to blame foot dragging on teachers and school districts, sidestepping the issue that many of the steps schools need to take to ensure they're safe for reopening require additional funding – funding they've been denied for decades.

Instead of the current 'teachers vs. parents' framing surrounding school reopenings, we must reframe this debate as a struggle of workers vs. bosses, people vs. profits, and humanity vs. an economic system that does not guarantee survival. Anything less would be to play into a narrative that divides us.
In the fight over school reopenings, it's not parents against teachers. It's the people against our masters. We want our power back.