

NY teachers threaten strike, urge more COVID testing

NEW YORK (Reuters) – New York City teachers on Wednesday threatened to strike or bring legal action unless the largest U.S. school district implements a more rigorous COVID-19 testing plan and other safety measures before reopening schools next month.

The warning by the United Federation of Teachers, which represents the city's 133,000 public school teachers, could delay Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to provide a mix of in-classroom and online learning from Sept. 10.

"The minute we feel that the mayor is trying to force people in to a situation that is unsafe ... we go to court, we take a job action," UFT President Michael Mulgrew said during a briefing, adding that a "job action" could include a strike.

Asked about Mulgrew's comments while touring a school in Brooklyn, de Blasio responded: "Look, any union leader who talks about doing something illegal should really think twice about what he's saying."

He was referring to a New York state law that bars public employees from striking or engaging in sickouts.

The mayor said city officials would continue working with the union on the reopening and insisted that all facilities would be safe, adding: "We're going to keep moving forward to get schools ready for our kids."

De Blasio has said the district will use a blended learning plan of part remote, part in-person, with a recommendation that students and staff get tested at least once a month, sit 6 feet apart and wear masks on school buses.

Some U.S. schools and universities got off to a faltering start in reopening campuses this week. In several cases, spikes of positive COVID-19 tests administered to returning students and staff forced schools to delay or scupper plans for classroom instruction and limit students to online learning.

The University of Notre Dame in Indiana and Michigan State University rolled back their plans for in-person classes on Tuesday following a surge of positive test results. Notre Dame pushed back classes by two weeks and Michigan switched to remote learning for the term.

COVID could make health care even more unaffordable

By Sarah Gantz

The Philadelphia Inquirer

More than 40% of American adults under age 65 don't have sufficient health insurance and struggle to pay for health care, and the coronavirus pandemic could make health care even more unaffordable, according to a new report by the Commonwealth Fund.

Previous research has found that the unprecedented rise in unemployment due to the pandemic has not meant an equally dramatic rise in the number of people who are uninsured. That's because many people who lost their job during the pandemic

pandemic, found that insured rates are about the same as previous years. But researchers worry that the pandemic's long-term effect on the economy will have an outsized impact on people who are already struggling more to pay for health care:

40% of Latino people and 24% of Black people were uninsured at some point in the last year, compared to 17% of white individuals.

“The affordability problem in U.S. health care is just persistent and we don't see a lot of change.”

—Sara Collins, vice president, Commonwealth Fund

38% of people who work for a business with fewer than 20 employees were without insurance at some point during the year, compared with 12% of workers at companies with 100 or more employees.

never had insurance to lose in the first place. Many got covered under a spouse's plan, while others became poor enough that they could qualify for Medicaid.

But health care affordability is about more than insurance – ask anybody who is insured and still can't afford health care. The pandemic will just aggravate family budgets, said Sara Collins, vice president of the Commonwealth Fund, a national health care policy organization.

"So much with this pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in our health care system, and cost exposure is one of them," Collins said. "The affordability problem in U.S. health care is just persistent and we don't see a lot of change. Those issues are continuing to happen at pretty high levels and they are disproportionately affecting people with low income, people of color – people who were affected by the pandemic."

According to the Commonwealth Fund's Biennial Health Insurance Survey, 21% of adults were "underinsured" in the first half of 2020, meaning they had health insurance but spent more than 10% of their household income on health-care costs beyond plan premiums.

About 12.5% of working-age adults were uninsured and 9.5% suffered a gap in coverage, according to the report.

Impact on already struggling Americans

The survey, among the first to evaluate insurance coverage during the

Under the Affordable Care Act, businesses with fewer than 50 full-time employees are not required to offer health insurance.

34% of families earning less than 133% of the federal poverty level (about \$28,300 for a family of three) were uninsured at least part of the year, compared with 10% of families with incomes above 400% of the poverty level (about \$86,800 for a family of three).

More than a quarter of adults who were insured all year said they had trouble with a medical bill or medical debt in the last year, according to the Commonwealth Fund survey. Among those paying off medical debt, half said they owed more than \$2,000.

Rising deductibles that outpace wage growth are among the main drivers of high out-of-pocket costs, according to the report. A deductible is what an individual must spend before the plan begins to cover health expenses at a higher rate.

The share of adults with a deductible greater than \$1,000 has doubled since 2010, when high-deductible plans became a popular way to deal with the soaring cost of insurance. In 2020, 46% of privately insured adults have a deductible greater than \$1,000, compared with 22% in 2010, according to the study.

"Unless there's a significant drop in deductibles in private coverage, many households are going to face health care costs that are going to take up a larger share of shrinking household budgets," Collins said.



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