Illinois governor belatedly places entire state under “stay-at-home” order in response to coronavirus pandemic

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At a press conference Friday afternoon, Illinois Democratic governor J.B. Pritzker announced he was placing the entire state under a “stay-at-home” order beginning 5 p.m. today. The announcement of this measure, ostensibly to stop the spread of the highly infectious COVID-19, comes far too late. Rising infections indicate that hospitals are already being overwhelmed by cases contracted over the past few weeks, and the state has done little to reassure millions of workers who stand at the edge of a financial precipice.

According to Pritzker, there are now 585 official cases of COVID-19 in 25 counties throughout Illinois, with 163 new cases on Friday, both of which substantially understate the true infection rate, due to low levels of testing. The official death toll now stands at five. The governor’s office also estimates that the number of infections may jump to 3,400 by next week as testing becomes more widely available.

Pritzker’s stay-at-home order is currently scheduled to run through April 7, with all “non-essential” businesses ending operations. This builds on a previous order Pritzker issued on Sunday which closed bars, restaurants, gyms, and other facilities, and another on Monday which banned gatherings of 50 or more. It was only on Friday, March 13, that statewide school closures were announced, initially only until March 29. Pritzker’s latest order pushes the official tentative opening date back to April 8 as well, though it is likely they will be closed for much longer.

However, even as the governor and other officials tout the measures they have taken, Pritzker acknowledged “many people will still go to work.” Among those expected to continue working through the order, largely without meaningful safeguards, are workers at grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, medical facilities, transit and road workers, journalists, those involved in maintaining infrastructure, and anything relating to agriculture and the food supply. Restaurants will also continue to operate delivery or takeout services.

Despite mass layoffs in the restaurant and hospitality industries, among others, the billionaire Pritzker announced no serious measures to address the dire circumstances facing large numbers of people. According to the Illinois Department of Employment Security, 64,000 people filed for unemployment from Monday through Wednesday, more than 10 times more than seen in those same three days last year. While requirements for receiving unemployment payments have been slightly relaxed, these do nothing for “gig” workers and others who are not covered by this system.

One major Illinois-based corporation that will be unaffected by the shutdown is John Deere, the agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer, which the Trump administration designated this week as “essential critical infrastructure.” Many companies also plan to flout the order, claiming they qualify as essential services. Pritzker basically acknowledged this would happen and said law enforcement would only intervene “when necessary.” Illinois Manufacturers’ Association president Mark Denzler has appealed to both Pritzker and Lightfoot to designate all manufacturing facilities and supply chains as “essential.”

Despite the official presence of COVID-19 in the Chicago area since January 24, with the first positive test result, the state and local governments have carried out the policy the WSWS has labeled as malign neglect. Schools and businesses continued operating, and events proceeded as normal, despite the known risk that the infection would be propagated to wide and vulnerable layers of the population.

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Decisions by Pritzker, as well as Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot, also a Democrat, to carry on events and services in the face of the outbreak can only be characterized as criminal. Pritzker insisted on holding the Illinois primary election this past Tuesday, claiming the in-person election could not be delayed because voters often need personal help that is unavailable online. Just prior to the election, Pritzker announced his endorsement of former Vice President Joe Biden.

Lightfoot, for her part, resisted initial calls to shut down the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and was ultimately only overruled by the governor. However, even after acquiescing to closing down schools, Lightfoot and her administration made the shocking decision to keep open the facilities of the Chicago Public Library (CPL) and Chicago Park District, and ordered workers to report.

Chicago public health commissioner Alison Arwady said the library was being kept open so staff could, "provide for those who have no other place to go for basic access to the internet or other resources." She claimed to be confident workers "can provide these services in a way that is safe and sanitary." Library workers on social media dispelled these claims, saying library patrons and workers were being put into dangerous levels of contact with one another.

One librarian who spoke to the *Chicago Tribune* noted, "People trust us," and said, "if we are open, we are telling them that we are still trustworthy, that they should feel safe in our spaces, and I don't think there is any CPL (Chicago Public Library) staff who feel we have been able to make our spaces safe for the public now."

The librarian also acknowledged, "We can't stand in for all of the social services that have been cut and not replaced in past years. We are librarians, we are not trained social workers." This is entirely correct. Illinois and Chicago have both slashed social services to the bone and hollowed out the social infrastructure over the course of decades. Leaving librarians and other library staff to attempt to pick up the pieces of this frayed social order is not only unfair, it devalues their professional training as well as the importance of libraries as places of learning and knowledge.

The same can be said for teachers and schools, which the Lightfoot administration tried to justify keeping open primarily so they could provide meals and other services to students. Over the course of three days this week, after schools were closed to teachers and staff, CPS distributed roughly 500,000 meals.

In the face of widespread protest by librarians throughout the country as well as local residents, as well as closures of branches due to worker sickouts and wildcats, the Lightfoot administration planned to move Monday to close down 61 branches. However, 19 branches, as well as the main downtown library were to stay open, while staff would be rotated from all branches to the remaining locations. This plan was widely expected to result in higher concentrations of patrons, many of whom would be classified as more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to existing illnesses, homelessness and poverty.

The library union, AFSCME Local 1215, part of ASCME Council 31, did absolutely nothing to help library workers or protect them from this pandemic. The most notable part of the union's complaint was that library workers were "fearful" and "feeling abandoned," due to Lightfoot's policy. In response to Pritzker's order, Local 1215 President John Rayburn fawned over the decision saying, "I would just like to thank them both," and added, "hopefully the people of Illinois can overcome this."

Indeed, the unions in Illinois, like their counterparts everywhere, have used the crisis to pledge their allegiance to the capitalist state and force workers to report. In a joint statement issued with John Deere, the UAW announced it was "answering the call" to continue to operate "as the Nation comes together to slow the spread of COVID-19."

It is clear that in order to fight the COVID-19 outbreak as well as the ruling class's attempt to use this crisis to carry out further attacks on workers' living standards and pollute social consciousness with chauvinist and nationalist filth, new organizations of struggle are needed. The SEP urges workers to study our statement and take up the struggle for socialism. It is only on this basis that the global COVID-19 pandemic can be resolved on a progressive basis.

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