

Democratic Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf begins unsafe reopening of 37 counties

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Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, has begun the partial reopening of the state economy, which will inevitably deepen the spread of COVID-19 within workplaces and lead to a surge in the number of deaths in the state. Last Friday, Wolf lifted restrictions on 24 counties located in the north-central and northwestern parts of the state, with plans to extend this reopening to the 13 counties in the southwest quadrant of the state this coming Friday.

Pennsylvania has the sixth highest infection and death rates in the US. Over the past week, the state has reported about 7,500 new cases, an increase of 17 percent. As of Monday, there were 57,154 confirmed cases and 3,731 deaths, according to the Department of Health.

Largely underreported, Philadelphia is the hardest hit area of the state. As of Saturday there were 15,008 cases and 857 people who have died in the county. The surrounding counties account for another roughly 14,000 cases and 1,253 deaths.

The northeastern part of the state, which includes Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Hazelton, Allentown and Bethlehem, is also being devastated, with nearly 5,000 cases and over 300 people killed by the virus. Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, has 1,511 known cases and 123 people who have died.

At least a third of the reported deaths have occurred at nursing and other long term care facilities, yet the Wolf administration continues to block the publishing of the specific details.

The reopening process entails three stages categorized as red, yellow and green. Counties in red are still under stay-at-home orders. Ostensibly, for a county to move to yellow requires that particular metrics are met, including having fewer than 50 new confirmed cases per 100,000 people reported to the state government over the past 14 days; having enough testing available for individuals with symptoms, and targeted groups such as the elderly, health care workers and first responders; a systematic case investigation and contact tracing foundation in place; and identifying high-risk institutions and “assurance” from facilities in providing formal staff training, screening, and supplies of PPE (personal protective equipment) for workers.

Counties meeting these requirements will be moved to the yellow phase, in which businesses and childcare centers will be

allowed to reopen, though some restrictions will apply such as the continued closure of gyms, barber shops, nail salons, casinos and theaters. The final phase is green, which entails a complete lifting of restrictions.

Most of the counties lifted from the stay-at-home orders are primarily rural and sparsely populated. The generally low number of COVID-19 infections in those areas attests to the fact that social distancing and the stay-at-home orders have been effective and should not be prematurely lifted.

In fact, none of the counties meet the criteria to move to the “yellow” phase, as nowhere is the contact tracing and testing required in place. It is entirely unfeasible to fully understand and document the amount of cases in the state without a comprehensive testing and contact tracing initiative. Moving 37 counties to the yellow phase by Friday, far from providing safety for workers and their families, will only accelerate the spread of the virus in Pennsylvania.

Small right-wing protests in Harrisburg and at Wolf’s home were recently staged by small-business owners demanding the immediate opening up of the economy. Republican lawmakers have failed to overturn the stay-at-home order at the state Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court.

On Monday, local officials from seven Republican-led counties that were still designated red—Lancaster, Lebanon, Dauphin, Cumberland, Franklin, Schuylkill, Beaver—announced that they plan to reject the order and lift restrictions independently, while the Cumberland County and Perry County Sheriff’s Offices have said on a Facebook post that they will not enforce the shutdown any longer. In total, these counties have a combined 5,809 cases and 356 deaths.

US President Donald Trump took to Twitter to support the Republican officials, tweeting: “The great people of Pennsylvania want their freedom now, and they are fully aware of what that entails. The Democrats are moving slowly, all over the USA, for political purposes. ... Don’t play politics. Be safe, move quickly!”

Wolf has responded by stating that he will cut off state funding to any counties that defy his orders, and that individual businesses could lose their health department certificates, liquor licenses or certificates of occupancy.

Wolf’s decision to lift stay-at-home orders in part of the state

is being presented in the media as a rational alternative to the moves by Republican governors to lift stay-at-home orders throughout their states.

However, Wolf is fully aware that reopening the economy will produce a spike in the number of workers becoming infected and dying for corporate profits. Proclaiming the future creation of a civilian corps to combat the virus, Wolf said, “As businesses begin to reopen, we’re walking a tightrope between health and economy.” This is a false dichotomy as it is possible to have safe working conditions, but it would require broad testing and contact tracing, among other steps, none of which are being done adequately.

While Wolf says the corps’ purpose will be to conduct testing and contact tracing, he would not say how many people the corps would employ, when it would start hiring or why he is reopening the economy well before the corps starts operations in late September.

Pennsylvania, like the rest of the US, is still incapable of mass testing and contact tracing, the principal methods that the World Health Organization (WHO) has decreed necessary to eliminate the virus. In total, only 256,000 people have been tested in the state, or a meager 2 percent of the population.

Lacking copious supplies of personal protective equipment, the state government has explicitly stated it will not provide hospitals with sufficient masks, gloves and other equipment.

At a state Senate hearing last Monday, Secretary Rachel Levine said begrudgingly, “Teams have been literally scouring Pennsylvania and the nation and the Earth to try to get [PPE]... In the past, that has gone to hospitals. And we will give out to hospitals when necessary now, but the focus ... is on long-term-care living facilities.”

As the state reopens, workers will be forced to go back to work under unsafe conditions or quit and become ineligible for unemployment benefits. According to Wolf, himself a businessman, the workers have the “ultimate sanction to say, I’m not coming to work ... and they have the ability to petition the federal government, the state government, and the local government” if they feel unsafe.

Amazon workers in Pennsylvania have issued many such complaints about the abysmally inadequate safety conditions in the company’s warehouses. An Amazon worker at AVP1 told Pennlive, “Believe me—we’ve complained and complained and complained. What does it mean? What will they actually do?” A worker at the Syncreon Apple fulfillment center in Cumberland County said, “I’m thankful I have a job, but it was stressful enough already. Now there’s a threat of exposure [to COVID-19]. It’s flat-out greed.”

Meatpacking workers in Pennsylvania also face horrendous safety conditions, with the state leading the US in the number of food processing plants with confirmed cases of COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Among the 22 meat- and poultry-processing plants, 858 workers have contracted the virus and many workers have died. On April 9,

Enock Benjamin died at the Souderton Facility, and on April 28 a worker died at Bell & Evans in Fredericksburg.

Another worker, Rafael Benjamin, who worked at the Cargill plant in Hazleton, was forced by the company to remove his facemask at work and died on April 19. Benjamin’s coworkers told Bloomberg that the company listed several reasons for prohibiting face masks: that only sick people should wear them, that nurses and doctors need them more, and that it elicits fear in the workplace. The CDC has said nationwide over 4,900 meatpacking workers have tested positive for the virus and at least 20 deaths have tragically happened.

Across the US, nursing homes have been ravaged by the virus, but Wolf still insists on lifting restrictions. One of the largest nursing homes in the western part of the state, Brighton Rehabilitation and Wellness Center, had assumed the entire facility—about 800 people—had contracted the virus, forcing the nursing home to stop listing the number of deaths and infected patients and staff.

Likewise, a Delaware County nursing home near Philadelphia had to call in National Guard nurses and medics to assist in caring for patients. Broomall Rehabilitation and Nursing Center has refused to reveal the number of deaths or infected employees and patients at its facility.

Rural areas are, moreover, still highly vulnerable to the virus. The health care infrastructure in rural counties has been decimated by inadequate funding for decades by both Democrats and Republicans, forcing shutdowns, layoffs, and long commutes for patients. Alarmingly, rural areas over the last two months account for 7,500 deaths.

Workers have responded to the demands that they sacrifice their lives for profit with a growing number of strikes, protests and demonstrations to demand safe conditions, the shutdown and cleaning of factories and adequate PPE. In Pennsylvania, since the start of the pandemic, sanitation workers have struck in Pittsburgh, nursing home workers struck in Northhampton County, Beaver County, and in South Philadelphia, Amazon workers protested in Hazleton, Hershey Chocolate workers struck in Palmyra and meat-processing workers staged a sickout near Easton.



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