

Illinois reports record COVID-19 death toll as businesses and politicians prepare to “reopen”

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As of May 13, 84,698 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in Illinois. On Wednesday, 1,677 new cases were confirmed and 191 were reported to have died in the last 24 hours, the highest number of deaths in a single day so far. On Tuesday, the state reported its second-highest death toll to date. There have been 3,792 confirmed deaths in the state.

“We haven’t passed our peak yet. We have seen more stability in our numbers, but so far, we are not seeing significant declines in key metrics like hospitalization,” Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker told the media on Tuesday.

These deeply worrying figures were announced as state and local officials and business leaders prepare to end mitigation via shelter-in-place and distancing, sending workers back on the job in order to finance the enormous bailout of Wall Street and the super-rich led by the Trump administration with the support of congressional Democrats.

On Monday, Pritzker announced all areas of the state are preparing to move into the third, more relaxed phase, of the four phases of social distancing after May 29, except for the northeast part of the state, which includes Chicago and the populous counties around it that make up the metro area.

Robocalls went out to Ford workers Tuesday at Ford’s assembly and stamping plants in Chicago and nationally, announcing a back to work start date of May 18. Workers took to social media to express their frustration and anger at their health and safety being sacrificed so that Ford can try to make as much money as possible as the pandemic continues to claim lives.

One worker wrote, “Look at what Ford is doing, compromising our health to build cars. It is impossible

for everyone to be six feet apart and build cars!”

Ford workers also asked important questions: “If the city is still shut down, why isn’t Ford?” “What about carriers of COVID-19 who don’t have fevers?” and “Why isn’t Ford opening factories based on the number of cases in that area instead of one big opening of everyone?”

Among those who have died in recent days is Unique Clay, a 31-year-old letter carrier for the US Postal Service. She was a resident of Englewood and had given birth to her third child just a few days before her death.

Pritzker’s administration announced Tuesday that state lawmakers agreed to add \$250 million to Illinois’ Hospital Assessment Program, through which hospitals receive most Medicaid funding. The administration also announced \$75 million in funding for hospitals to continue providing COVID-19 services in the state and \$25 million in grant funding from a \$45 billion “Rebuild Illinois” infrastructure program for local projects.

Even as tens of billions are pumped into the stock market each day, the lack of financial support for households and small businesses, other than the miserly one-time \$1200 check and support for small businesses that was mostly scooped up by large corporations, is pressing households now desperate to make ends meet back into work where they risk their lives and health and that of those around them.

Some 3,700 Illinois households are reporting not yet having received a stimulus check due to immigration status.

On May 11, gig workers and contract workers were able to file for benefits in Illinois for the first time.

Reports indicate 50,000 people filed unemployment claims on the first day the website opened, and just under 70,000 accessed the website. Federal funds have been available since March, but these workers, who do not qualify for traditional unemployment, could not apply until Monday when the state finally opened a computer system to accept the claims. Despite not qualifying for traditional unemployment, these workers still must submit for traditional unemployment, wait to have their claim denied, and then apply for the extended benefits.

COVID-19 infection rates and death tolls are significantly higher for black and Hispanic communities in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and New Orleans, a result of the dramatically higher rates of poverty and inequality. *ProPublica* reported in early May that African Americans, who make up about 30 percent of Chicago's population, made up about half of the 1,000 coronavirus deaths at that time.

Health sociologist Fernando De Maio, DePaul professor and co-director of the Center for Community Health Equity, told *Crain's* the cause of this inequality in health outcomes is capitalism: "...[V]ery quickly we saw that the asthma maps looked very much like the diabetes maps, which looked like the cancer maps, and they all combine into these horrible life expectancy maps." This is, De Maio noted, "part of poverty, part of living in a capitalist society. But it doesn't have to be."

The response of the Democratic administration of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to the pandemic has been to threaten those not observing social distancing with arrest, fine and jail time while pushing for the reopening of Chicago Public Schools in September.

On May 2, Lightfoot spoke from West Garfield Park to warn that Chicago police will arrest those not observing the stay-at-home orders and participating in large gatherings: "We will shut you down, we will cite you, and if we have to, we will arrest you. Don't make us treat you like a criminal, but if you act like a criminal and you violate the law and refuse to do what's necessary to save lives in the middle of a pandemic, we will take you to jail. Period."

It was immediately observed these warnings were being enforced unevenly, falling on working class neighborhoods and not more affluent areas. The overcrowded Cook County Jail has been a COVID-19 "hotspot" for several weeks. Lightfoot making good on

those threats could well result in the further spread of the illness and deaths of those detained in the jail. According to the Cook County Sheriff, seven of the jail's 4,032 detainees have died after contracting COVID-19 at the jail and another 190 are currently ill, fewer than 10 of whom are hospitalized. Hundreds of others have tested positive and reportedly recovered.

Last month, Lightfoot announced that just 2,000 Chicagoans would get \$1,000 in rent relief, half via a lottery and half through non-profits working in neighborhoods. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago is over \$1400 per month according to Apartments.com.

Lightfoot has recently extended the powers of the Mayor's office. She has also established a Economic Recovery Task Force, appointing to lead the effort an experienced hand in capitalist "emergency management," Sam Skinner, an 81-year-old Illinois Republican who once led Commonwealth Edison and served as chief of staff to President George H.W. Bush.

The pandemic has only further exposed the fundamentally reactionary character of the Democratic Party. City officials are moving quickly to collaborate with business leaders in service of the interests of the parasitic ruling class, placing working and middle class families at risk of illness, death and financial ruin.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the rejection of the return to work orders until the spread of the pandemic is stopped and safe and healthy conditions, overseen by rank-and-file safety committees, are established in all workplaces. During the crisis, workers must be provided with a monthly income that provides for a decent standard of living for their families until a safe return to work is possible.



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