

COVID-19 cases rise in Louisiana but governor refuses to reverse economic reopening

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Coronavirus cases are on the rise again in Louisiana. On Friday, June 26, the state reported an increase of 1,354 cases, 26 deaths and 47 hospitalizations, bringing the totals to 54,769, 3,077 and 700 respectively. Earlier in the week, on June 23, the state reported 1,356 new cases, the largest single day increase since April 7. The state's percent positive test rate has steadily increased since late May.

Louisiana moved into Phase 1 of reopening on May 15 and into Phase 2 on June 5. In response to the increasing number of cases and hospitalizations, Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards announced the state would remain in Phase 2 for at least another 28 days, rather than advancing to Phase 3.

Remaining in Phase 2 is a mild restriction. Businesses are allowed to operate at 50 percent occupancy and include such venues as restaurants, cafes, bars, shopping malls, gyms, barbershops and beauty salons, movie theaters, racetracks, video poker establishments, museums, spas and tattoo parlors, bowling alleys and event centers. Additionally, businesses that are directed to remain closed under Phase 2 are allowed to petition to reopen under a plan approved by the State Fire Marshal in consultation with the Louisiana Department of Health.

A few high-profile clusters emerged in the wake of the reopening and lifting of restrictions. Over 100 people tested positive after going to bars on the weekend of June 14 in Baton Rouge's "Tigerland" area, a hangout for Louisiana State University (LSU) students near the campus. In New Orleans, at least 25 cases were traced to a series of graduation parties for Isidore Newman High School students. Additionally, 95 percent of new cases reported on June 23 came from

community spread, rather than large gatherings.

Speaking to local news 4WWL, Warner Thomas, CEO of Ochsner Health system, said that hospitalizations around New Orleans were increasing, especially among people under age 40: "If you go back to the beginning of March, about 25 percent were 40 and under. Today, it's about 50 percent," he said. The 18-29 demographic now has the most cases in the state, accounting for 18 percent of infections.

Amidst the continuing spread of COVID-19, the Louisiana Department of Education released "guidelines" for how school districts across the state should plan to reopen for the 2020-2021 school year. Ultimately, each district will decide how to reopen, but they are instructed to prepare for three possible scenarios: traditional, hybrid or distance/remote learning. Should students or staff contract the virus, which the document admits is to be expected, the decision to close the school will be an individual, case-by-case process decided by school leadership.

The emphasis of the document, titled "Strong Start 2020: Guidelines and Resources for Reopenings," reiterates the most rudimentary protections offered by the CDC: wash hands often, wear face coverings and practice social distancing. Only a few requirements are listed, presented in a three-phase model in accordance with the state model. In Phase 2, groups must be limited to 25 people; students must have temperatures checked upon arrival; hand washing must be enforced upon arrival and every two hours thereafter; school buses must operate at 50 percent capacity.

Local universities plan to reopen for the fall semester as well. Tulane University in New Orleans will adjust its usual schedule and open five days earlier than

planned, on August 19, and send students home early on November 24. Citing the university's "financial position," the private institution plans to test all individuals returning to campus and provide frequent tests throughout the school year.

LSU, in Baton Rouge, plans to open in the fall following the state's phased-guidelines. The school plans to require physical distancing, face coverings, increased cleaning protocols and "recommended" hand washing. The school will conduct random testing of between 10 and 16 percent of the population of all LSU system campuses statewide; students and employees will be encouraged to participate. Those who test positive will be interviewed in an effort to conduct contact tracing.

The economic and social consequences of the pandemic continue to ravage the working class throughout the state. A study by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette estimated that one out of every four workers in New Orleans is without a job because of the pandemic. During the week of May 15, 321,700 people received unemployment payments in Louisiana, twenty-four times the number a year prior. The state pays a maximum of only \$247 per week in unemployment benefits. The federal addition of \$600 is due to expire at the end of July, plunging tens of thousands of unemployed workers and their families into absolute destitution.

Gary Wagner, economics professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, has warned that Louisiana is projected to experience a recession more severe than the economic impacts of Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession.

A moratorium on evictions in Louisiana expired on June 15. The *Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate* reported that the First City Court in New Orleans witnessed a flood of newly filed requests for eviction orders. A clerk for the court said his office typically receives 25 filings a day, but received 63 new filings on June 16, the day after the ban was lifted. Dr. Brendan O'Flaherty, economics professor at Columbia University, projects an increase in homelessness nationwide of 40–45 percent by the end of the year.

In response to the latest rise in cases, New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell, a Democrat, said, "If the city has to shut down we will do that, without any hesitation," but she has yet to make any serious

movements in that direction. She announced the creation of a task force that includes the Department of Code Enforcement, the New Orleans Police Department and state agencies to enforce compliance among businesses with city regulations, including mask and distance requirements.

The city's Health Department director, Dr. Jennifer Avegno, blamed young people for the rise in cases: "There seems to be a lack of understanding or a lack of responsibility among our young people and in some cases their parents... I'm imploring all of you to recognize your responsibility to your community."

Despite the measures that individuals must take to protect themselves from the virus and prevent its spread to others, the blame for the horrific scale of the pandemic does not rest with citizens or "young people." It is the result of the conscious, homicidal policies of the ruling class—including the politicians who claim to prioritize the safety of their communities. The financial interests of the oligarchs have driven the back-to-work campaign, the de facto policy of herd immunity, and the gutting of social and health care infrastructures over many decades which has made the US fertile ground for the virus.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote in its June 23 statement on the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The implementation of the necessary measures to stop the coronavirus depends on the intervention of the international working class. All the actions required to stop the virus—the shutdown of nonessential production, quarantining, mass testing and contact tracing—run up against the profit interests of the ruling class. Ensuring support for all those impacted by these measures requires a massive redirection of social resources."



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