

South Carolina emerges as new COVID-19 hot spot

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South Carolina has emerged as a national hot spot for the spread of COVID-19. A record 1,599 new cases were announced on June 27. Since then, the numbers have only been slightly lower, with 1,366 new cases reported on Sunday and 1,320 reported on Monday. However, the percentage of positive test results has increased precipitously from 9.6 percent on June 14 to 20.1 percent on June 27, indicating a vast underestimation of the actual number of active cases.

As of this writing the official death toll stands at 717 confirmed and 3 probable coronavirus deaths. COVID-19 hospitalizations in the state stand at 954.

In response to the surge in cases in South Carolina several states have imposed self-quarantine requirements on visitors from the state.

A few South Carolina cities including Columbia, Charleston and Greenville, have belatedly instituted mask requirements in the past week. However, Republican Governor Henry McMaster has continued to insist that a blanket mask requirement for the entire state is unconstitutional and unenforceable.

South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson contradicted this assessment, arguing that the face mask ordinances passed so far by local governments are legal and constitutional. “Based on court precedent,” he stated, “simply requiring someone to wear a mask at the grocery store, or stop smoking in a restaurant, or be home before curfew does not constitute a violation of rights.”

South Carolina was among the last to implement measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus and among the earliest to relax them. A statewide “home or work” order was not announced until April 6. Then, in an effort to prepare public opinion for an end to all social distancing requirements, several nonessential businesses were reopened on April 21 even before the “home or work” order was allowed to expire on May 4.

On May 4, restaurants were reopened for outdoor seating, forcing restaurant workers back to work even as the virus continued to spread among the general population. On May

12, restaurants were allowed to reopen their dining rooms, further endangering restaurant staff.

As cases of the virus rose in mid-June following this series of irresponsible reopenings, Governor McMaster absurdly combined a call for “individual responsibility” in slowing the spread of the virus with the reopening of bowling alleys. Since then, although COVID-19 cases have continued to soar even higher, the governor has insisted repeatedly there will not be another shutdown.

A temporary moratorium on evictions in the state was likewise allowed to expire on May 15. Moreover, although federal legislation in the CARES Act places a stay on evictions through August 24 for renters in federally subsidized properties, the onus has been on individual renters to determine whether eviction proceedings filed against them are lawful. Since there is no comprehensive list of all the properties that are covered by the legislation, this is difficult to do without professional legal assistance.

However, most working-class renters do not live in federally subsidized housing and have been left at the mercy of their landlords. Even prior to state and federal moratoria, South Carolina ranked number one in evictions in the US due to stagnating wages and weak tenant protections. Since the state moratorium ended, more than 2,500 renters have applied for rental payment assistance from the state-wide nonprofit organization SC Thrive.

Lacking any meaningful protections against eviction, many workers have been forced to make a choice between homelessness and exposure to a dangerous disease at work, that is, if their jobs still exist at all.

About 195,129 South Carolina residents either collected or applied for unemployment benefits during the second week in June, and the official unemployment rate in the state still stands at more than 12 percent.

One of the starkest measures of the magnitude of the social crisis unleashed by the criminal handling of the pandemic by the ruling class in the state of South Carolina is the marked increase in demand for free school meals. In some districts, demand for free school meals is more than three times

higher than it was last summer.

The state is home to many of the most poorly funded school districts in the country, and, as schools shut down in response to the pandemic, many children have also lost all access to an education. Though teachers have sought to track down students who do not contact schools for educational materials, as many as 15,225 children remain unaccounted for since mid-March. Many families have not returned phone calls or attended online learning sessions.

State Superintendent of Education, Molly Spearman, has speculated that some of these children may be homeless or victims of neglect, or may have become caretakers for their sick parents. In some cases, it has been discovered that high schoolers have abandoned their education to seek employment to keep their families afloat.

Though Governor McMaster did not order daycares to close, more than half of licensed childcare centers in the state elected to close in response to the pandemic, and many of these have not reopened. As pressure mounts for a return to work, many parents have been unable to find childcare and have faced long waiting lists for a place in daycares that remain open.

These daycares have had difficulty maintaining safe and sanitary conditions on their premises. Two daycares in the Myrtle Beach area have closed temporarily after staff members tested positive for coronavirus. During the pandemic, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control has recorded a total of 57 cases of coronavirus at daycare facilities around the state, including both staff and children. It has acknowledged that this number may underestimate the true number of cases.

Although a South Carolina taskforce has presented detailed guidelines for reopening schools in the fall, plans remain tentative. There is widespread opposition among teachers and parents to anything resembling a return to the normal operation of schools. In many cases, despite enormous pressure for a premature return to work, families are unwilling to sacrifice their children.

In Greenville, where cases of COVID-19 have soared in recent weeks, a survey of 27,786 families showed that more than half would not or were unsure whether they would send their children back to school in person in the fall.

Meanwhile, the two largest universities in the state, the University of South Carolina in Columbia and Clemson University, have announced plans to reopen for in-person classes in the coming fall semester.

In a message to students on June 24, University of South Carolina President Robert Caslen acknowledged that many students and parents are “asking if it is safe to return to campus” in light of “the recent rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in the state.” Absurdly, Caslen declared

that “the answer is yes.” Like Governor McMaster, Caslen insisted on the importance of individual responsibility in combating the spread of the virus.

Though face masks will be required “in all classrooms, the Thomas Cooper Library, Center for Health and Well-Being, fitness centers, Russell House and all dining facilities,” President Caslen stopped short of requiring them in dorms, hallways, and the densely packed sidewalks traversed by students between classes.

As workplaces throughout South Carolina have reopened, there have been few reports about unsafe working conditions in the media. However, this does not indicate that working conditions are safe. Only in those cases in which the spread of the virus has become undeniable have companies made any public statements.

For example, after restarting production on May 4, BMW Manufacturing was forced to admit on June 18 that 14 active cases of COVID-19 had been discovered at its assembly plant in Spartanburg. A total of 11,000 workers are employed at the facility.

A report in the German edition of *Business Insider* published on June 26 underscores the international character of the murderous back-to-work campaign imposed on the working class. Like the Big Three auto makers, General Motors, FCA and Ford, BMW is determined to preserve its own profits at any cost to human life.

The article states that the dramatic rise in cases being recorded in the southern US must serve as a warning that the coronavirus “could affect Germany worse than expected,” by which it means the German ruling class. “For example,” it continues, “other new coronavirus hotspots like South Carolina and Alabama have BMW and Daimler factories. Another lockdown would be devastating for them.”

Workers must oppose the criminal response by the ruling elite to the pandemic and fight for a socialist response guided by science. As a first step, the *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers in South Carolina and throughout the US to contact us to expose conditions at your own workplace.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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