

Over 7,500 children in Tennessee have been diagnosed with COVID-19

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27 July 2020

New data released last week by the Tennessee Department of Health has revealed that 7,572 school-age children—those between the ages of 5 and 18—have been diagnosed with COVID-19. This figure is a damning exposure of the lie that children are somehow less susceptible to catching or spreading the virus, which has been used to justify the push to restart in-person schooling in the coming weeks. As well, the confirmed total is not a true reflection of the extent of the virus due to the overall lack of testing among this age group.

As part of the homicidal return-to-work drive initiated by the Trump administration with the complicity of the Democratic Party, Tennessee's Republican governor, Bill Lee, began the process of lifting restrictions on May 1, one of the first to do so. Forcing schools to reopen is a critical next step in getting workers back on the job, even as infections and hospitalizations from COVID-19 hit record highs in the US.

The virus has been on a rampage throughout Tennessee since the lifting of restrictions in May. On Sunday, there were 3,140 new cases, and the last week saw nearly 130 confirmed deaths from COVID-19. Overall, the state has nearly 94,000 cases of the novel coronavirus and is fast approaching 1,000 fatalities, figures which are expected to be amplified by the reopening of schools.

Despite this, and following the demands of the Trump administration, preparations are underway to send children and teachers back into the schools, with some districts beginning classes as early as July 30.

The response of Governor Lee's administration is for the districts themselves to formulate their own plans for reopening, although Lee has indicated he will be issuing state guidelines on Tuesday following

recommendations released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last week. As a result of this "hands off" policy, reopening plans vary from district to district, which has led to uncertainty and chaos for students and educators alike.

This muddled and improvisational approach is underway in other states as well. A teacher in West Virginia explained the situation in that state—where new infections are also rising—telling the WWS, "The problem here is that the state department really should've made the decision early on as to what the [state is] going to do, but they don't want to take any responsibility with that so they're putting the responsibility off on the counties." Adding, "The problem with that is that each county is going to have its own plan which [would] require special funding, and they have no way to get additional funding directly."

The *Murfreesboro Daily News Journal* has outlined the reopening plans for 27 districts throughout Tennessee. Nearly half have either not mandated masks or have made mask-wearing optional.

Then there is the question of testing, or lack thereof. Shelby County Schools—which includes Memphis and most of the surrounding communities—made clear in its reopening plan that the district "will not administer or require COVID-19 tests of employees or students." The district, which supports 95,000 students, is located in a county with nearly 18,000 confirmed infections, one of the three highest in the state along with the counties that include Nashville and Murfreesboro.

Despite the raging pandemic, the majority of the districts surveyed will begin reopening with traditional in-person learning, with remote and "hybrid" learning optional. Only Nashville's Metro school district will begin with online-only classes, which is a reversal of previous plans to start in-person learning on August 3.

Davidson County, where Nashville is located, has already recorded nearly 17,500 cases. Metro officials announced that the shift to online-only learning was done out of concern for the health and safety of students and teachers. In reality, this decision was a response to growing opposition from educators and parents concerned over the deadly consequences of forcing their children back to school while the virus continues to circulate broadly in the state's largest city.

Indeed, as the WSWs recently noted, there is mounting anger in the US among teachers, parents and students over school reopening plans, with tens of thousands having organized various displays of opposition, including protests, rallies and car caravans. Citing a poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs, Bloomberg recently noted that "Only about 1 in 10 Americans think daycare centers, preschools or K-12 schools should open this fall without restrictions."

In an effort to get in front of an independent struggle of teachers in Nashville, the city's teachers union, the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association (MNEA), plans to hold a mock funeral procession this evening. However, the focus of the event is not on the potential deaths of students and teachers, but rather it will focus on "mourning the loss of effective leadership."

Workers must no longer rely on these bankrupt organizations, which are doing nothing to seriously mobilize teachers and young people to oppose the reckless and homicidal reopening of schools. In fact, the unions are actively formulating the best means of forcing teachers back into unsafe schools as part of the overall back-to-work campaign. As American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten recently made clear, the union's position is that teachers need to return to the classroom so that "parents who work outside the home can go to work."

The Socialist Equality Party is the only organization that is seeking to mobilize educators, parents and students in opposition to the murderous back-to-school initiative of the capitalist class. To carry out this struggle, educators and school staff must take the necessary step of forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of, and in opposition to, the trade unions and the two corrupt parties of American capitalism. These committees must be equipped with,

and guided by, the program and perspective of international socialism. Workers who are interested in rank-and-file committees are urged to contact us today.



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