Cornell residential advisors hold one-day strike over coronavirus safety as school reopens

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22 August 2020

On Wednesday, student residential advisors (RAs) for Cornell University's dormitory system held a one-day strike over unsafe working conditions as the university prepares for thousands of students to return for in-person learning. Cornell is located in Ithaca, in upstate New York.

The strike action was spontaneously organized in response to the university's reckless reopening plans, which left RAs with even larger workloads than in pre-pandemic semesters. RAs do not have a union or representation in Student Campus Life. They published a list of demands for personal protective equipment (PPE), hazard pay for having to physically work with dozens of students during this semester, standardized responsibilities, and a representative who can participate in Housing and Student Life meetings, among others.

About 50 RAs participated in the single-day strike on Wednesday beginning with the student workers sitting out an online instructional webinar about the RA jobs.

The opposition from the RAs garnered significant support from the student body and university staff. The RAs' twitter page, formed on August 19, quickly gained attention from alumni, professors and graduate student workers.

It took less than one day for Cornell administrators to agree to meet with a representative of the RAs to discuss the demands. The administration was no doubt worried about bad press amid the unfolding disaster at many other colleges and universities that have pushed ahead with in-person learning.

Following the meeting on Thursday, the Cornell RAs announced via Twitter that they were ending their strike in order to negotiate the demands with the administration. As of Friday evening, there was no further information regarding an agreement between the two parties.

Cornell RAs have so far taken a brave stand against the reckless reopening policy of their school. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student movement of the Socialist Equality Party, supports the students in their fight against unsafe working conditions. However, we urge the Cornell RAs to consider the broader issues, and dangers, involved.

Under the current conditions, it is incredibly dangerous for students, staff and faculty to return for in-person learning at all.

Cornell is expecting between 4,500 and 5,000 undergraduate students to move into on-campus housing next week. This represents a decrease of only about 30 percent from the normal capacity of 7,000. Many hundreds of students who will live off-campus in Greek housing or subleased apartments have already begun moving into the area.

The Cornell reopening plans were outlined in a statement published on June 30. It states that the school reopening plans are based on modeling (produced by a Cornell professor) that concludes that students are safer on campus than at home.

The cornerstone of Cornell's reopening plan is the research conducted by Cornell professor Peter Frazier, who concluded that "residential instruction, when coupled with a robust virus screening program of the form we intend to implement, is a better option for protecting the public health of our community than a purely online semester."

This plan has nearly identical testing and containment protocols as have been used at Ivy League and other elite universities, including testing undergraduates twice a week. The theory is that students will be safer if they are on campus, monitored very closely, and tested routinely.

However, despite the university's supposedly sound

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modeling, their official statement made a clear warning of the risk involved: "There are, of course, limits to the predictive power of epidemiological modeling… There is *simply no way to completely eliminate risk, whether we are in-person or online; even under the best-case projections, some people will become infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and some will develop the severe form of the COVID-19 disease.*"

The arguments made by the administration are riddled with holes. Most notably perhaps, these testing and containment plans do not extend beyond the community of those paying tuition and living in campus housing. Cornell, like nearly all universities around the country, has no plan to provide randomized or stratified testing for the population of Ithaca as they welcome thousands of students into the area.

Cornell University is in Tompkins County, New York, with a population of slightly over 100,000 residents. The town will soon be flooded with thousands of students from all over the country who could very well catch and spread the virus during the course of their travel.

There is no doubt that if Cornell is allowed to reopen for in-person learning it will lead to more infections, more hospitalizations and more deaths.

For colleges and universities that have so far moved ahead with in-person learning, the results have proved disastrous. Only days after starting in-person courses this fall, several universities, including Princeton and the University of Southern California, have already been forced to hastily cancel or postpone their plans and reinstate online learning.

On Tuesday, Notre Dame announced that it was moving all undergraduate classes to remote instruction for two weeks, and Michigan State asked undergraduates who planned to live in residence halls to stay home while they transition to remote formats.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which did not conduct widespread testing prior to reopening last week, announced Monday that all undergraduate instruction would be moving online immediately. This move came after four separate outbreaks occurred on campus during opening week, leaving 130 students infected and several hundred more quarantined.

One administrator and professor at Yale University, Laurie Santos, the Head of Silliman College and a psychology professor, sent a chillingly honest email to campus residents this week telling them that they may be killed by COVID-19 while attending school this semester: "We all should be emotionally prepared for widespread infections—and possibly deaths—in our community. You should emotionally prepare for the fact that your residential college life will look more like a hospital unit than a residential college."

In Cornell's reopening plan, the residential advisors are made into part-time managers of the activities of dozens of students each, helping to enforce the social distancing measures within the dorms and stop such activities as parties. Students should be warned that it is very likely that when the inevitable outbreaks do occur on campus, the administration will follow the lead of other leading universities in blaming students' "bad behavior" for the clusters of infections.

Some colleges have even used the virus as an excuse to beef up campus police. Boston College, for example, is hiring a Boston police detail to "keep an eye on and break up parties on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights."

Despite the irresponsibility of some students, the scapegoating of youth for the rise in COVID-19 cases is founded on a lie. The unbridled spread of COVID-19 is not the fault of a relatively small number of students but is a direct consequence of the criminal response of the American ruling class to the pandemic, which has been entirely based on the demands of the financial and corporate elite.

The ruling class is determined to reopen schools because it is a central pillar of the broader goal of reopening the economy and getting workers back to work to produce profits.

The IYSSE urges students, faculty, staff and others at Cornell to broaden their struggle beyond their current demands. We urge students to join teachers and staff at schools and colleges around the country in opposing the reckless drive to reopen schools.

In order to prepare for such a struggle, the Socialist Equality Party has launched the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee is hosting an online meeting today to discuss how teachers, students, parents and other workers can organize a fight back. We urge Cornell students to attend the meeting at 3 p.m. EDT (12 p.m. PDT), today, August 22.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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