California Governor Newsom continues murderous policies as COVID-19 cases in state reach 700,000

Peter Ross
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No less than in Republican-controlled states, the Democratic Party administration of California Governor Gavin Newsom has, since the beginning of the pandemic, acted to protect the interests of the ultra-wealthy. It has long since abandoned any serious effort to contain the spread of the virus.

On May 7, six weeks after California became the first state to issue shelter-in-place orders, Newsom announced that the state faced a $54 billion revenue shortfall. One day later, with the state averaging over 1,700 new cases per day, the administration began planning a phased reopening.

On June 12, as the number of cases in the state passed 125,000, with more than 3,600 new cases per day, California moved to stage three of the reopening, allowing indoor businesses such as restaurants, bars and gyms to reopen. During this period, the infection rate exploded from about 1,700 new cases per day on May 8 to more than 5,300 on June 28.

After peaking at over 9,000 new cases per day in late July, and following a renewed closure of bars, indoor dining and gyms, the infection rate now stands at about 6,000 per day. But the push to reopen workplaces and schools threatens to bring about yet another wave of cases.

The level of testing, at 85,000 per day, remains grossly inadequate to monitor, let alone contain, the pandemic.

On August 13, the *Los Angeles Times* published a timeline titled "How a rush to reopen drove Los Angeles County into a health crisis." It documented the direct impact of the reopening policy on the number of infections and deaths in Los Angeles. At the time of that exposé, in Los Angeles alone 5,000 had died from COVID-19. In the ensuing three weeks that number has increased by 15 percent.

Despite the alarming data, last Friday Newsom announced a four-tier reopening process that kicks off today with the reopening of hair salons, barber shops and retail stores to 25 percent capacity, to be progressively extended. The measure is being touted as a return to pre-pandemic "freedom"—a clear concession to right-wing complaints that necessary science-based restrictions are a limitation on personal liberties. In reality, the organized opposition to public health-based restrictions in the name of "freedom" is being promoted by the corporate elite in line with its murderous return-to-work policy.

The unfolding economic and fiscal disaster, which the state government has seized upon to deepen its attacks on public education and social infrastructure, threatens to plunge millions of Californians into destitution. The Newsom administration estimates that the 2020-2021 fiscal year will see a 24.5 percent unemployment rate, a nine percent drop in personal income, and a 21 percent decline in new housing permits. These projections are optimistic in light of social reality.

In Los Angeles County, unemployment has only slightly declined—from 20 percent in April to 17.5 percent in July, which means a million people are without employment. A 2020 study by UCLA's Institute on Inequality and Democracy estimates that almost a half million people living in rental housing in Los Angeles County have no income and are at a high risk of homelessness.

California's homeless population was estimated to be about 150,000 in 2019, a number widely believed to be a drastic underestimation. The homeless population increased by 21,000 in 2019 and is expected to grow by another 30,000 this year as a result of the mass unemployment and economic devastation caused by the pandemic. The homeless, many of whom suffer from preexisting medical conditions, are among the most vulnerable to infectious disease.

With 154 billionaires and more wealth than all but the four wealthiest countries in the world, California is at once the richest and the poorest state in the country. According to the United States Census Bureau, after adjusting for the cost of living, California has the highest poverty rate in the nation, with an average of 18.2 percent of its 39.5 million residents living in poverty over the last three years. While the median income in the state is slightly above the national median, costs for housing, electric power and essential goods are far higher than the national average.

In a recent report, the Public Policy Institute of California found that more than 35 percent of the state, almost 14 million people, live in poverty or "near-poverty." This section of the population, subjected to poor housing, inadequate medical care and unsafe working conditions, confronts both higher infection

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and fatality rates than the general population. In July, more than 300 workers—three quarters of the workforce—were infected at a downtown Los Angeles sweatshop owned by Los Angeles Apparel.

The pandemic has swept through California's notoriously overcrowded prison system, infecting more than 9,300 inmates and 2,200 staff members. Close confinement, poor medical care and limited access to personal protective equipment have led to an infection rate almost five times higher among state prisoners than in the general population. California's prison population stood at about 117,000 in April 2020, with 32 out of 35 prisons holding incarcerated populations above their design capacities.

A particularly deadly outbreak at the California Institution for Men has resulted in over 1,000 infections and 20 deaths. The transfer of 121 inmates from this prison to San Quentin State Prison resulted in an even deadlier outbreak. More than 2,100 prisoners at San Quentin, half its population at the start of the outbreak, have so far been infected.

After decades of stagnant wages and cuts to health care and social services, working people have been made to bear the brunt of the recent $54 billion cut in the state budget, which includes a 10 percent pay cut for state employees, delayed payments to public schools, a $1.7 billion cut in funding for public colleges and universities, and a $248 million cut from housing programs. Newsom, who pledged in mid-May to take a salary cut in solidarity with state workers, has continued to receive his full monthly salary of $17,479.

At an August news conference, Newsom had the audacity to claim that "there is no money sitting in the piggy bank" to pay unemployment benefits. But between March and June, the same period during which the virus was spiking throughout the state, California's 154 billionaires saw their net wealth increase by about $170 billion, more than triple the budget shortfall.

The trade unions have in every instance acceded to the state's demands, including a 9.23 percent cut in state workers' salaries and a suspension of state contributions to retirees' health care, agreed to by the state's largest public employees union, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1,000. Cal Fire Local 2881 has agreed to a 7.5 percent pay cut.

The trade unions have likewise supported plans to resume in-person instruction in the public school system. While the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest in the nation, has opened the school year with fully online instruction, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which sold out last year's teachers strike and paved the way for more budget cuts and school privatizations, is collaborating in school reopening plans.

In a July report, the UTLA proposed a list of half-measures, including keeping students in small "pods," reducing class sizes, and requiring masks for students and staff. The call for "pods" is practically identical to the Newsom administration's guidelines, which call for children to be grouped into learning "cohorts" of no more than 14 children and no more than two supervising adults.

The California Teachers Association has likewise called, in the vaguest terms possible, for hand washing, face coverings, social distancing inside classrooms, and "mental health counseling." Even if these inadequate measures were enforced, they would do little to make classrooms safe for students and educators.

Statewide, counties are allowed to reopen schools if they are off the state's COVID-19 watch list for two weeks. Orange County and San Diego County, two of the largest counties in the state, are both already off the list. On Monday, the Orange County Board of Education voted to allow schools to resume in-person instruction next month, without masks or social distancing. A group of teachers and parents protested outside the meeting and gathered 26,000 signatures urging the board to reconsider.

According to Los Angeles Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer, the Newsom administration is giving local health officials the ability to grant waivers to school districts that permit schools to reopen for students in grades K-6 once case rates fall under 200 per 100,000 people. This threshold—twenty times what the Centers for Disease Control defines as low incidence—has been chosen not out of consideration for the safety of students and educators, but in order to provide a justification for reopening. On Tuesday, the case rate in Los Angeles County was 196 per 100,000 residents, just under the threshold.

Claims that children transmit the virus less frequently than adults have been shown to be fraudulent. A paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that children under the age of five carry higher amounts of the virus in their nasal passages than older children and adults, while an extensive contact tracing study conducted in Italy found that children younger than 15 years old transmit the virus most efficiently.

The overwhelming majority of parents and educators are opposed to resuming in-person instruction. "I don't think a waiver is appropriate at this time given the rate of transmission and the number of cases," said Mill Valley parent David Howard, "You know, you get a bunch of kids in a classroom with stagnant air, that's a petri dish to spread the virus."

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