

New York deploys COVID-19 “SWAT Team” to SUNY Oneonta after six percent of students test positive for virus

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A recent outbreak of COVID-19 cases at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oneonta has resulted in 245 infections among students, six percent of the currently enrolled student body. This comes just one week after classes began and just one week before public grade schools are scheduled to open across the state, except in New York City where reopening has been delayed until September 21.

In response to the outbreak, New York Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo has deployed a “SWAT team” of 71 contact tracers and eight case investigators to Oneonta, a city of 13,000 three hours northwest of New York City. Three rapid testing centers will be opened, offering 15-minute tests for free to all residents of the city.

SUNY Oneonta is the first college in the state to suffer from an outbreak of COVID-19 this Fall. While the state government and SUNY system have acted quickly in response to the outbreak, it was their policies in the first place that not only made it possible, but inevitable.

State universities have been allowed to fully reopen with in-person classes despite the diagnosis of tens of thousands of new coronavirus cases around the country every day. State guidelines for infections on campus are woefully inadequate. Schools are required to return to remote instruction for just two weeks in the event that more than 100 students or 5 percent of students, whichever is smaller, become infected over a two-week period. Colleges may return to normal activity if cases fall below the threshold.

If the local health department determines that the school is incapable of controlling infections then it may require the institution to continue with remote learning.

Local and state Departments of Health have the authority to enforce a 100 percent transition to remote learning if it determines that smaller outbreaks are straining the ability of the school to contact trace and isolate students.

What is being posited here is the idea that there is a reasonable level of infection, and by extension death, that is tolerable to the state government and SUNY system. It is irrational and unscientific to assume that infections will not translate to deaths among students and community members, and that even small clusters of cases will not spread off campus and possibly to other parts of the state.

This is not simply lax control of the virus, but a deadly experiment with student’s lives to determine the effects of a full reopening of economic activity. Cuomo described colleges as the “canary in the coal mine.” The significance of this statement cannot be understated. Students are being sent into danger as a test to determine whether it is safe to reopen economic activity.

But it is already known that it is not safe. As universities and public schools have reopened across the country thousands of students and educators have already become infected and dozens have died. Additionally, colleges are, as Cuomo also noted during his press conference, “similar to a dense urban environment.” One does not need to be a medical professional to draw the conclusion that placing students in a dense population would result in a rapid spread of the virus. This exact scenario has already played out in every city in the United States since March.

Fully aware of what they are doing, and unwilling to

accept blame for any deaths, Cuomo and the SUNY system have resorted to blaming students for the outbreak. Five students and three organizations at Oneonta have been suspended with further suspensions possible after several large parties were held on campus.

SUNY Oneonta did not require students to be tested before returning to campus. Nor were students required to be tested upon their return to campus. Instead, students were simply told to self-quarantine for seven days prior to arriving on campus, even while it is known that the incubation period for COVID-19 averages around 14 days.

Now the situation is being capitalized on by the Democratic Party-controlled state government to build the ground for the implementation of repressive measures. The use of the term “SWAT Team” to describe the contact tracers is not without intention. While the contact tracers are not on campus for policing purposes, the implication is that students are responsible for the outbreak at SUNY Oneonta. This raises the possibility for a more aggressive crackdown by police on student gatherings, and protests in particular, in the future.

Student led protests in New York state against police violence have drawn thousands of participants since May. Protests have occurred in cities and towns with SUNY schools including Geneseo, Oswego, Buffalo, Fredonia, Binghamton, and Albany. With police killings continuing unabated, it is highly likely that protest activity on and off campus will increase.

The events at SUNY Oneonta are just the beginning of what is to come, and a warning sign of how the capitalist class intends to sacrifice students and educators for the profits they intend to squeeze out of the population in the murderous drive to reopen workplaces and schools during the pandemic.



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