State University of New York scapegoats students for COVID outbreaks, prepares repressive measures

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11 September 2020

As COVID-19 cases continue to multiply across the State University of New York (SUNY) system, the state government is blaming students for the outbreaks. Just three weeks into the semester over 1,100 students have tested positive. Nearly 700 of these come from SUNY Oneonta alone, highlighting how quickly the virus can spread in school environments.

Refusing to take any responsibility for this catastrophe, the SUNY system is on a crusade to punish groups of students for gathering and lay the ground for further police repression on campuses.

The most severe example of this comes from SUNY Oswego in upstate New York. During move-in, Mayor Billy Barrow deployed city police officers to monitor students as they arrived at their off-campus housing. Since then, Barrow has ordered a surge in police officers during the weekends to patrol neighborhoods with college students and break up any suspected gatherings. He stated that the police have already intervened to break up parties off campus and have been going door to door in college rental neighborhoods.

These measures are being used to impose strict punishments on students, often without any judicial review. In SUNY: five students and one organization were suspended at SUNY Oneonta, 13 students were suspended at SUNY Fredonia, nine students and three organizations were suspended at SUNY Geneseo and 43 students were suspended at SUNY Plattsburgh, just to name a few. This is a common story across the country, with students facing suspension or expulsion, resulting in the loss of a semester of learning and a full semester's cost.

Thirty-six students have been "summarily suspended" at Purdue University in Indiana. West Virginia University suspended 29 fraternity students after they met for a party while in isolation. Decisions to suspend the students were made with disregard for proper judicial review and rights to due process.

Despite the irresponsibility of some youth and the role that misguided celebrations and parties may have played in spreading the virus, such criticisms and attacks on students are 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.

These crackdowns signal a turn toward coordinated police-state action directed against students as they arrive on campuses amid the socially and politically criminal drive to reopen schools and workplaces amid the pandemic. SUNY Chancellor James Malatras praised the "relationship between the city police department and the university police department," which he expected would "pay dividends in keeping down the amount of large gatherings and unofficial events that shouldn't be happening."

Malatras, a former top adviser to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, has lauded Oswego's COVID policies as an example of a "good plan well executed." The possibility is very real that local police will be deployed in other towns and cities to monitor students living off campus.

The utilization of the police force dovetails with the implementation of greater on-campus monitoring and surveillance. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, several schools across the country have stated they will monitor social media and security camera footage to identify students violating school regulations. Such

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violations of student privacy serve only the purpose to bolster the repressive tools available to campus authorities and to direct all blame onto students.

SUNY Oneonta President Barbara Jean Morris stated that the school would be "working to identify the students [photographed gathering] and will quickly issue disciplinary actions and possible suspensions. We will also step up our monitoring of these residence halls to prevent this behavior from happening again."

Efforts to monitor student interactions through the use of facial recognition software are not out of the question. Lock Port City School District in Western New York stoked controversy when it announced plans to implement a facial recognition system in its schools earlier this year. While such methods are nominally being used to break up unsafe gatherings, they inevitably will be used against students seeking to fight back against unsafe school reopenings, police brutality and other conditions being created by the authorities themselves.

This march toward authoritarian police-state measures arises in New York state, a core bastion of the Democratic Party. Democratic Governor Cuomo was hailed by the media during the early days of the pandemic as a messiah who would lead the country out of the crisis. He was even encouraged to enter the race for the Democratic presidential nomination as a last-minute substitution for the flailing Joe Biden.

In reality, Cuomo's response to the pandemic was lethargic and inadequate, overseeing the deaths of 30,000 New Yorkers as the state became the global epicenter for several months. His policies only appeared superior because of the abysmally pathetic responses from the federal and other state governments. Now that the crisis has slowed in New York, he is free to embark on the path the Democratic Party has been taking in other states; pursuing the same deadly policies as the Trump administration.

As recently as August 28 Cuomo tweeted out the battle cry "Test Test Test." But where is all the testing on college campuses? Of the 64 schools in the SUNY system, only three required testing prior to or during arrival. So far, fewer than 38,000 tests have been administered on campuses. This is one test for every 37 SUNY students, who number 1.4 million across all schools.

The abysmal state of testing on campuses is shown in the discrepancy between positive tests administered on campus and those administered at other testing centers. Cuomo has referred to college students as the "canary in the coal mine" and has stated that he expects similar outbreaks to occur in K-12 schools. However, keeping schools and workplaces closed to stop the pandemic would cut into the potential profits of the ruling class, a loss that Cuomo and his ilk are not willing to take.

Of the 1,139 positive cases at SUNY schools only 478 were from campus testing centers. SUNY Buffalo has seen 64 COVID-19 cases since reopening. Only two of these were from campus-administered tests. Similarly, SUNY Fredonia has confirmed 84 positive cases, of which five were tested on campus. Again, 64 students tested positive at SUNY Oswego, where 15 were campus-administered tests.

Students are being set up to fail. There has been no mandatory testing before arrival, limited testing available on campus and a lack of coordination and communication with the student bodies. Then, when an inevitable outbreak occurs, the administration blames the students and rinses itself of all responsibility.

Students must organize on their campuses with faculty and staff to form rank-and-file safety committees that will fight for their health and lives. These committees are being formed by educators in schools all over the country. All students and educators interested in taking up the fight to protect the lives and health of students and workers should join the national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and work to build committees on their campuses.

All educators, students, school workers and parents who support this initiative should join the online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Saturday at 3p.m. EDT.

Contact the WSWS Educators Newsletter and the IYSSE to get involved today!

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