

San Diego State University seeks to shift blame to students for coronavirus outbreaks following reopening

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The number of COVID-19 cases in California is approaching 770,000, with a death toll nearing 15,000. Despite these staggering figures, the state's major universities, including the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems, have moved forward with "hybrid models" of school reopening. The plans include a combination of in-person and online courses, placing three-quarters of a million students at risk of contracting the virus, along with hundreds of thousands of staff.

Since opening, hundreds of cases among college students have been reported every day, and many campuses have become outbreak hotspots. In Southern California, San Diego State University (SDSU) continues to make national headlines, with an explosion of cases that has created a community health disaster.

SDSU is the leader among California schools, with the highest number of COVID-19 cases, which increased by more than 200 cases since last week. As of Tuesday, over 648 COVID-positive students have been reported at the university, 73 percent of whom are undergraduates.

Responding to the negative press on skyrocketing cases, the CSU Chancellor's office issued an announcement on Monday that the majority of classes will continue online for the spring 2021 semester. The administration continues to hail preparations made for the current fall semester as a success.

Unsurprisingly, campus life continues as "normal." Brian, a freshman SDSU resident living in the dorms, told the WSWs that there is a lack of information, testing and personal protective equipment (PPE). "It feels like they're keeping us in the dark," he said. "The school has been giving out information on testing, and yet it is still not mandatory for students to get tested. Also, there are no places on campus to obtain proper PPE and cleaning

gear."

For weeks, many students avoided voluntary testing for fear of social stigma, repercussions from the school, and the horrific conditions of the isolation dorms that have been leaked on social media in a now viral tweet.

Attempting to respond to demands of mass testing, the university announced on Tuesday an end to their stay-at-home advisory and boasted a new nominally required testing plan. Reportedly, students living on campus will be told at random to report for testing, and receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card as an incentive. This public relations stunt will do little to nothing to stop the spread of the virus.

SDSU Vice President J. Luke Wood told reporters Tuesday that the administration has received 420 reports of student violations, such as not wearing masks, or participating in social gatherings. He added that "we will be moving forward with sanctions" for people or groups found breaking rules. Wood reported that some suspensions had already been made and ominously declared that students will face "consequences" if they don't submit to testing. How such testing will be made mandatory is yet to be stated.

Anonymous student reports on social media reveal horrific conditions for students who contract the virus on campus. According to social media reports, students who tested positive for COVID-19 soon find staff at their dorms, dressed in hazmat-style suits. The staff tell students they have minutes to pack essential belongings before being taken to isolation dorms without notice.

Brian confirmed these accounts, stating that he has watched on numerous occasions "ambulance vans parked on the street" outside his building and unidentifiable school officials in hazmat gear periodically picking up students. Brian stated, "Most of my floor tested positive

and got picked up at one point.” As their two weeks in isolation ends, some of the students are trickling back into their regular dormitory rooms.

While in isolation, students are housed in individual rooms in shared quarters with others who are infected. The students report receiving an “isolation kit” of cleaning supplies upon request and obtain food services via delivery. Food service is not provided every day for every meal. The university says it provides a bulk delivery on Fridays that is meant to keep the student fed for the whole weekend.

Students are not provided any additional supplies. Whatever they packed with them in the rush from their rooms to quarantine is what they will have for the remainder of the isolation period. On their own dime and at their own risk, students can order medical supplies to be delivered, or order food to be delivered via services like Postmates to the communal “drop off area.” Students report feeling highly anxious during isolation, alone and unsupported with an infectious respiratory illness, and made to feel their infections are their own fault.

Students thought to have been exposed to the virus are advised to quarantine, but without free and readily available supplies or support they largely carry on with their normal routines.

Additionally, the understaffed and under-supported student front desk staff and resident associates, who are students themselves, are charged with tasks such as sanitizing communal spaces and enforcing safety procedures. These student-workers are the primary resource for quarantining students and are on the frontlines of their university’s outbreak.

SDSU has placed the responsibility for the management of the outbreak largely in the hands of their lowest-paid staff (student workers, dining hall and maintenance workers, and cleaning staff), and in the hands of students themselves, often citing students’ “personal responsibility” as the cause, and the only solution, to the outbreak.

This is aimed at deflecting blame from the university itself for reopening, and behind the university administration and the Democratic Party establishment that runs California.

There are a lot of financial interests at stake. A sophomore who wished to remain anonymous reported to the WSWS that “I am very certain that SDSU opened the dorms because their finances... SDSU gets plenty of money from students living on campus.”

The events at SDSU are largely identical to the

reopenings happening on campuses across the United States.

States run by Democrats and Republicans alike have followed in lock step with Trump’s reopening drive, placing thousands of lives in danger by recklessly allowing students to begin athletic and team sport training, join in-person classes, and open dormitories. These actions risk the lives not only of students, but of thousands of university workers, including housekeeping, cafeteria, and groundskeeping staff, the lowest paid workers on the campuses.

The blame for these policies does not begin and end with the university administrators and even state bodies. The return-to-school campaign is part of a broader effort to force all workers back to work in unsafe conditions. University administrations, under Democratic and Republican state governments, have adopted the same negligent policies due to the demands of the financial elites and Wall Street.

The fight against the unsafe opening of schools is part of the broader opposition of workers everywhere to the entire agenda of the ruling class. Struggles have broken out across K-12 and university campuses, including a strike by four thousand service workers at the University of Illinois, 800 nurses at a UI hospital in Chicago and some 2,000 grad student instructors at the University of Michigan. The pandemic is not an isolated event, but is one of many devastating crises caused by the capitalist system.

Now is the time for students, educators, and workers everywhere to oppose the homicidal policies of the ruling class as they continue to wittingly force workers into unsafe conditions. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) stands with students and teachers in the fight against the deadly return-to-school campaign, and encourages others across the US and the globe to build rank-and-file safety committees to close unsafe schools and businesses.

We encourage all youth and students to join the IYSSE and register for our upcoming public call in meeting on Thursday September 17th at 8pm EST/5pm PST to join the struggles of students together and unite them with growing opposition within the working class.



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