

Youth in the US most likely to be low-paid ‘essential’ workers

Melody Isley

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As the United States surpasses 7 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 200,000 deaths, the population is only just beginning to feel the effects of the pandemic.

With the pandemic triggering an economic crisis not seen since the Great Depression, the American ruling class has taken advantage of workers’ economic anxieties to push for a deadly return to school, and the reckless return to work that will endanger millions of people regardless of ethnicity or age. Every day, millions of essential workers are put at risk, most of them young people.

Universities have prioritized their finances over student safety by allowing millions of students to resume on-campus instruction and take up residence in dormitories. This has led to hundreds of outbreaks across the US, and will prove to have countless tragic and deadly consequences.

In Southern California, for example, San Diego State University’s president decided to counter criticisms by claiming a “plague of parties” continues to cause the university’s rising daily case count, with 802 positive students as of September 19.

Instead of shouldering any responsibility for putting students in harm’s way, administrators and politicians across the country echo these sentiments, blaming students for rising cases, and making ineffective cosmetic adjustments to their policies, attempting to tame negative headlines and relieve them of liability.

This week, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, released an insulting “public relations” video starring “certified young person” Paul Rudd via Twitter.

Resembling a “Saturday Night Live” skit, Rudd paints the picture that youth are indifferent to wearing masks, using “hip and funny” slang in a rap music style sequence. The supposedly comedic video breaks down to Rudd yelling at the supposed audience of young people to “just wear a mask, it’s not that hard; people are dying. It’s preventable. I shouldn’t have to make it fun.”

Cuomo shared this video, now with almost 8 million views on Twitter, in order to blame young people for the pandemic, and draw attention away from his own disastrous handling of the COVID-19 crisis. New York state has the highest death count in the US and Cuomo has received pushback from teachers and

students over his drive to reopen schools in New York City and across the state.

It is the hope of Governor Cuomo, and politicians and bureaucrats like him, that by blaming students and young people for the worsening pandemic, that they can avoid accountability. Similarly, in July, President Donald Trump, incorrectly blamed protests and young people for a spike in cases—conveniently ignoring his own reckless rhetoric regarding masks and ignoring many states’ premature reopening at the start of the summer.

The ruling class would like Americans to think that the virus is being spread due to students’ immaturity—blaming their ‘not yet developed prefrontal cortex’ and their penchant to have irresponsible parties and gatherings.

The fact of the matter is, however, that the ruling class and US policymakers are at fault for the deaths of more than 200,000 Americans and tens of millions losing their jobs. Students who have contracted COVID-19 are not to blame, and neither is their supposed party-going. Students and young people are, in fact, vulnerable to the disease because they are forced to work due to arbitrarily being categorized as “essential workers.”

Those under 30 are the most likely to be low-paid ‘essential’ workers—including health care workers, those in retail and food service, agriculture workers and your local barista. Essential workers are almost guaranteed to be exposed to the virus either from the public, or their coworkers.

Many of these workers report unsafe conditions and fear for their own health and safety, and for their loved ones that they could unknowingly expose to the virus. They report their employers not providing PPE, allowing social distancing, or proper cleaning supplies and protection from the public. Many workers confront customers who can effectively ignore mask-wearing requirements and employers that do not give hazard pay and health care benefits. The majority fear loss of pay or retribution of some kind if they request time off or cannot return to work due to health reasons, leading many to continue working while unknowingly ill.

The WSWWS spoke to Mazee, a 25-year-old worker in Kansas City. Mazee works two different bartending jobs and was recently let go from her third job as a waitress. Mazee has an

autoimmune disease but is compelled to work as she is the only source of income for her family, including her immunocompromised mother. She is constantly battling anxiety and depression, and her savings have been wiped out health care costs—as she has no health insurance and has been forced to shoulder those costs.

On her jobs, Mazee says she wishes the public knew what essential workers are going through. Echoing many fearful and struggling workers, Mazee explained, “It’s hard to find people who care, we’re called essential, but we’re replaceable. There’s always someone else forced to sacrifice their health to their job.” Exhausted and at risk, Mazee is nonetheless forced to work in unsafe conditions to survive.

Lynda, a 29-year-old worker from San Diego, told the WSWs that she was working two jobs at the start of the year, at a bar and at a coffee shop. Because of the pandemic she lost her main source of income as the bar shut down permanently, and she was forced to pick up more hours at a local coffee chain.

Like many workers, Lynda feels she is not provided adequate protection from her employer and is scared to take time off or call out sick or fears looming costs like her car breaking down, or potential eviction from her apartment.

In a sentiment close to many working people, Lynda expressed frustration with the impossible tasks she has faced under the capitalist system and since joining the workforce after the 2008 financial crisis: “There’s no way to get up. It’s endless crises since I started work when I was 17. I don’t know how to fix this. ... They tell me ‘just work hard,’ but I work for \$13 an hour. I can’t make more than that. Even with so much time, working for 12 years at all kinds of jobs, and I can’t get out.”

Inequality, wage stagnation and economic hardship of all kinds plague every worker; however, young workers and students are the most vulnerable to the economic challenges of the pandemic. For most workers in the United States, an unexpected expense of \$500 would be catastrophic.

Workers have not recovered since the 2008 recession, and will now face an even greater challenge in the coming years with the COVID-19 depression. Many young people are burdened with astronomical student debt, and endure low wages and high expenses, like health care, that keep them in constant financial distress.

While Millennials became the largest working generation, with every member being of working age, the number employed fell by 16 percent this spring as the US economic output collapsed.

Gen Z, largely those just coming of age, have yet to even attempt to grow their savings or establish themselves in the workforce. This youngest generation will bear the brunt of the historic economic struggles to come, and will largely become trapped in low-paying, easily exploitable work as they face fewer job opportunities and greater debt than their elders.

The COVID-19 crisis presents an unprecedented challenge to

all people, but especially those who are on the front lines. The younger generations already experienced the highest levels of stress, clinical anxiety and depression, in recent memory.

The ruling class is targeting victims of the pandemic in order to distract workers and the public from the fact that the self-interest of the financial elite has already cost the world nearly 1 million lives and the livelihoods of millions more. At every level, officials are attempting to find a scapegoat, and a distraction, from their homicidal negligence. The ruling class would like younger workers and students to be assaulted by the effects of the crisis for years to come, while also taking the blame. Workers everywhere are being sacrificed in order to build up the wealth of the ruling class and maintain their power.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crises facing young people and workers are not an unpredictable act of the universe, but a foreseeable consequence of the capitalist system that is based on the exploitation of the working class, creating a society based on historic levels of inequality. Hundreds of thousands of deaths could have been avoided had the ruling elite warned the public back in January when they were made aware of the COVID-19 threat, but the crisis has been profitable for the financial oligarchy who sees a silver lining payday from mass deaths of the elderly and pensioners.

Masses of youth and workers are becoming politically aware, and a revolutionary struggle is appearing as the only path forward to guarantee that lives will be placed before profits. Workers and youth alike must unite together in the United States and internationally in the fight against the homicidal policies of the ruling class and join in the revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system.

To this end, students and young people should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to fight against the deadly return to school and oppose the continual threats to their safety by organizing independent rank-and-file safety committees in their workplaces to demand better conditions and enter the fight for their health and safety.



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