

As COVID-19 infection rates skyrocket, hundreds of Missouri schoolchildren quarantined

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On Thursday, Missouri reported more than 1,500 new COVID-19 cases and the greatest number of hospitalizations since the start of the pandemic. Neighboring Illinois reported the highest daily confirmed new cases, 3,059, since the state's peak in May.

Despite the sharp rise in cases, hours are being cut for Missouri's COVID-19 information hotline. It will continue to operate seven days a week, but new hours effective Oct. 1 are 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., down from 24 hours a day. Furthermore, Oct. 10 will be the last day Missouri residents qualify for extended unemployment benefits, which the state has cut even as long term unemployed figures rise due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

The entire state is considered a "red zone" for COVID-19. The rate of new cases and positive tests in the state was one of the highest in the country for September. Despite this, Republican Governor Mike Parson refuses to implement further restrictions or impose mask mandates.

While the state recently launched a COVID-19 dashboard that tallies statistics including infections and deaths in each region, the Department of Health and Senior Services announced that it will no longer provide daily updates on social media of COVID-19 spread. The DHSS was previously giving daily updates on Facebook and Twitter. The new dashboard reports numbers that are three days old. It shows seven-day averages for hospitalizations instead of daily updates. This will make it more difficult to spot the emergence of hot spots and plan effective responses to virus spread.

The White House task force has taken note of the situation in Missouri and warned that it is in a dangerous position to see increased rates of infections and deaths through this fall and winter. Jefferson County, a rural portion of the St. Louis region, has in total nearly 4,600 positive cases reported and 65 deaths.

Governor Parson has returned to the State Capitol in Jefferson City as of this Monday after announcing that he and First Lady Teresa Paulson tested positive on Sept. 23. Four of the governor's aides had also tested positive.

As is the case through the US, the bipartisan policy of reopening schools and businesses is driving the outbreak in

Missouri. As of this week 499 students have been quarantined in the Fort Zumwalt School District in St. Charles County after being exposed to the virus.

KMOV reported that Rockwood School District (St. Louis County) reopened last Wednesday to children in phases, sending 3,000 kindergarten through second grade students back to class. Parents of children in third through fifth grade are being made to decide by Oct. 6 whether they want to do in-person or all-virtual learning, beginning Oct. 14. Brittany Anderson, a mother of a fourth-grader, said, "I really wish that we could at least see how it's gonna go with the younger kids before we're forced to make a choice that's going to impact the next several months. Just two weeks to see how the younger kids do in-classroom would make me feel so much better."

Missouri has been steadily breaking records for COVID-19 hospitalizations as 1,158 were recorded on Friday, Oct. 2, by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. As of Sept. 30, a total of 372 patients were on ventilators in the St. Louis region, meaning 36 percent of area ventilators are currently in use, the highest percentage for any region in the state.

State hospitals and laboratories are predicting a tragic increase in cases through the rest of the year, as COVID-19 coincides with flu season. "The symptoms are going to be essentially the same; how does a clinician know whether they have flu or COVID-19? We anticipate that this will be a horrible, horrible fall and winter," State Health Labs Director Bill Whitmar told Missourinet. State agencies are encouraging residents to get a flu shot.

Dave Dillon of the Missouri Hospital Association recently noted, "Missouri has been in the top 10 for probably a month nationally in the number of positive cases." He pointed out to KSDK, a local NBC affiliate, that the virus is spreading most quickly through rural counties. "In the metro those numbers are flat and where they're growing is upstate Missouri and rural counties. It's rural Shannon County that has the highest rate in the state." Rural hospital networks are subject to being overwhelmed to the point at which patients are sent to hospitals in more populated counties for treatment.

Without action by the state, it is up to individual counties and municipalities to impose a patchwork of restrictions like indoor capacity limits and mask mandates. On Oct. 2 St. Louis City banned evictions until Nov. 6 by order of circuit court Judge Rex Burlison. The city had been under a previous eviction ban that was set to expire the same day. The nationwide federal eviction ban in place until Jan. 1 has loopholes that still leave millions of renters vulnerable to losing shelter. Kansas City's Jackson County filed an administrative order Sept. 4 allowing evictions, in violation of the federal eviction ban. The ACLU is suing in Jackson County's 16th judicial circuit court over the matter.

St. Louis County executive Sam Page announced a further rollback of restrictions on Monday. High school students are now recommended to return to in-person instruction, as well as youth sports such as hockey, football and basketball. Businesses will be allowed 50 percent capacity, up from 25 percent. Self-service fountain drink stations will be allowed to be in use again. The county's mask mandate remains in effect.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that over 1,800 Missouri state workers have tested positive so far for COVID-19. The largest portion of these state workers to have contracted the virus are those with the Department of Corrections, with 646 cases.

Despite the urgency of the situation, Missouri State Auditor Nicole Galloway has admitted that the state has spent only \$1.6 billion of the \$2.9 billion granted by the federal government for Missouri's coronavirus response. \$2.1 billion of the federal grant was from the CARES Act.

Missouri will inevitably see additional economic turmoil and job losses as the weather cools and cases spike. Businesses, such as restaurants which have depended on outdoor seating to make up for indoor seating restrictions, will lose that income during winter.

With Trump scuttling negotiations over a second stimulus this week, federal assistance is not coming any time soon for these small businesses. The national Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and CARES Act assistance programs have been wholly inadequate to address the financial losses of small businesses. However, the ruling class has seen its fortunes rise this year in terms of the financial bailouts and the stock markets.

The state's third largest metro, Springfield, is dealing with rising cases in the city limits and in the many small rural communities from which residents commute to Springfield for work. Steve Edwards, CEO of local CoxHealth, said, "We're trying to balance protecting our community with protecting our staff, and not exhausting our staff who are working so hard right now to care for all these patients." Explaining the challenges of controlling virus spread in his area, "Springfield is an entity that's masking in a sea of surrounding areas and counties that don't mask." Springfield has a mask mandate but surrounding counties do not.

DHSS director Randall Williams responded to concerns about

the inconsistency in mask requirements by declaring, "We just have to double down on our message that no matter where you are in Missouri, if you can't social distance, you need to wear a mask." The state organizations nominally tasked with protecting the health of the population are putting it on individuals to guard themselves against the virus, a strategy that has already failed.

Howell County (population 40,000) has 830 confirmed cases and eight deaths as of Oct. 2. Boone County reported three deaths from the same long-term care facility Sept. 29. The county refuses to disclose the victims or the name of the facility to the public, using the excuse of privacy reasons. A story from the *Southeast Missourian* reported that Cape Girardeau County also has four deaths as of Oct. 1 in long-term care facilities. In the county there have been 174 cases and 21 deaths in such institutions. For the city of Cape Girardeau (population 40,500), the average has been almost six new cases a day per 10,000 residents.

Across the state, farmers are seeing a significant reduction in income this year due to the global economic slowdown triggered by the pandemic. Adam Jones, a St. Charles County soybean and corn farmer, told KMOV, "Global events affect us dramatically because we export so much of our crop, especially soybeans, and a large amount of those soybeans actually go to China. So with the coronavirus and with the issues with China with trade, we were dramatically affected by prices." Low crop prices this year means less in income for these farmers. Jones further commented, "There's not a whole lot of margin in farming right now, so when you take twenty percent off it puts a lot of people underwater."

There is no hope of appealing to the conscience of the governor, DHSS officials, or any other state government entity to take up a serious fight against the deadly spread of coronavirus. Whether that happens depends on the independent initiative of the working class. If you are worried about the spread of COVID-19 in Missouri and want to do something to protect your community, contact the WSWS today.



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