

San Diego educators force delay in school reopenings as COVID-19 spreads in the region

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16 October 2020

Across the United States, the federal and state governments have accelerated the deadly reopening of schools in order to compel parents to return to work. As a result of these homicidal policies, over 53,000 students and teachers have become infected with COVID-19 and dozens of educators have already died since late July.

In Southern California, as in many parts of the country, haphazard state guidelines have allowed for variability and flexibility between districts as they transition back to in-person instruction. San Diego Unified School District, the largest school district in San Diego County, has opened its doors to special education students and small groups. Meanwhile, smaller districts, like Santee School District, plan to welcome all students and staff to their campus simultaneously by the end of October.

Schools in southern San Diego County have yet to implement fully in-person instruction, but the region's largest district, Chula Vista Elementary School District, has reported 25 confirmed cases among educators and students since March. An undisclosed number of these cases have occurred since the district resumed limited in-person support sessions on campuses involving about 1,200 students, which began on September 8. The district employs more than 3,500 staff and has roughly 22,000 students.

Fully aware of the dangerous explosion of cases that await them, Chula Vista teachers are fighting against full reopenings and have reported major issues, including a lack of mask wearing, limited and improper cleaning supplies, purposely delayed communications on positive tests, and other safety concerns.

In August, before the district had set any date on its reopening plans, over 200 educators and parents participated in a "Motor March" to protest against in-person learning, many with homemade signs brandishing the slogan "Only when it's safe." Educators and parents have also been increasingly outspoken on social media, with many citing the latest scientific studies that prove that COVID-19 can be

easily transmitted as aerosols in classrooms, given the lack of filtration systems. One parent noted that "teachers are truly kept inside a box with no filter."

Faced with this groundswell of opposition, the district, after originally sending out letters to parents announcing an October 26 reopening, made a surprise about-face in a town hall meeting this week, postponing their reopening plans until 2021. The delay to reopening stems directly from the actions of rank-and-file educators and parents, not the letters or legal threats by the Chula Vista Educators union which has taken credit for the date change.

While the danger of school reopenings has been forestalled in Chula Vista, surrounding districts are continuing to pressure for fully in-person learning. In doing so, state and local officials are prioritizing the interests of corporations and businesses over the health and safety of the working class.

San Diego County has a clear distinction between the case count in their working class areas and more affluent zip codes. On average, there are 1,288 cases per 100,000 people in San Diego. However, the more working class south San Diego County, where the Chula Vista schools are located, has almost double the average cases per capita, with 2,146 infections per 100,000 people.

Composed of the Chula Vista, National City, and San Ysidro communities, the South Bay, or South County, is the closest area to the US-Mexico border. Fifty-eight percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino according to Census data. Due to its proximity to Baja California, Mexico, South County is home to many residents who are essential workers, teachers, and health care professionals. Additionally, tens of thousands of families straddle the border, crossing daily for work, school, and other economic factors, including less expensive products and services such as health care.

The South Bay has consistently suffered the worst COVID-19 case rates in the region, yet still has the lowest

levels of COVID-19 testing for the county overall. The largest employers in the region are the Sweetwater Union High School District, Walmart, and the local hospitals. These workers are being put on the front lines of the pandemic and have become the greatest victims of the homicidal and unscientific policy of “herd immunity.”

National City Mayor Alejandra Sotelo-Solis expressed the callous indifference of officials in a statement on reopening, declaring, “We all expect that with school and business reopenings there will be an uptick, but we are all better prepared than we were in the onset of the pandemic.” The “we” the mayor is referring to is not those workers being put at risk, but the ruling class and the bureaucratic government officials at every level that are prepared to allow the spread of COVID-19 and accept mass infections and deaths as collateral damage for their “herd immunity” policies.

Last week, county officials announced their new plans to supposedly assist the hard-hit South Bay region, which amount to partnering with various nonprofits to promote bilingual public awareness campaigns, urging residents to abide by public health guidelines. This will do little to stop the spread of the virus, which requires the immediate closure of non-essential businesses and schools.

The county has also cynically touted a new free COVID-19 testing site in the South Bay region, which is open only four days a week, with a capacity of merely 200 tests per day. By comparison, San Diego County’s most affluent city, La Jolla, with an average home price of \$1.62 million, has easy access to the University of California, San Diego’s COVID-19 testing program, which can support up to 1,500 tests a day through a partnership with leading diagnostics manufacturers and the university’s own massive research and medical apparatus.

It is increasingly evident that public officials are intentionally providing insufficient testing in lower income communities, where the virus is spreading like wildfire, in order to obfuscate relevant statistics. California has created a color-coded tiers system to determine which counties are subject to which restrictions.

Most counties in the state are in the “purple tier,” meaning their businesses are subject to the highest restrictions. Other counties, like San Diego County, occupy the “red tier,” allowing businesses like gyms and hair salons to open, and restaurants and bars to have outdoor service. Only a handful of counties have reached the minimally restrictive “orange” or “yellow tiers.” If the county were to provide testing at the levels required in southern San Diego, it would mean a definite increase to the county’s COVID-19 case numbers and overall positivity rate, and in all likelihood would push it into the more restrictive “purple tier.”

In order to maintain its “red tier” status, San Diego has

opted to actively obfuscate its data to excuse their dangerous reopening plans, instead of adopting comprehensive public health programs. Citing their care for small businesses, the Board of Supervisors had recently lobbied Governor Gavin Newsom to artificially lower case counts by ignoring a still growing outbreak of over 1,157 cases at San Diego State University.

The Governor did not heed the county’s request. However, conspicuously, in the latest weekly case assessment by the state, the language of the testing rates was slightly adjusted in their favor. San Diego was able to maintain its current red tier status solely because the county had barely performed more COVID-19 tests than the state’s median of 216 tests per 100,000 people.

The entirely arbitrary and constantly shifting tier system has been designed in such a way that counties can cut corners, ease restrictions, and provide superficial political cover to give the appearance that the state is responding to growing case numbers in order to temper popular outrage.

The situation in southern California is not occurring in isolation, but is a microcosm of broader trends seen across the US as the “third wave” of the pandemic deepens. Once again, daily case counts in the US are now surpassing 50,000, with 8,272,812 cases in total and 214,000 deaths. Since the pandemic began, there have been over 854,000 COVID-19 and almost 16,600 deaths in California, with over 3,000 new cases per day. California has nearly the same number of COVID-19 deaths as Canada, Japan, and the Philippines combined.

As the pandemic continues to claim lives and livelihoods in record numbers, workers in southern California and around the world must fight for their safety by forming neighborhood and workplace rank-and-file safety committees, to coordinate a unified struggle of the entire working class against the capitalist system and the herd immunity policies of the ruling class.

Significantly, educators and students founded the San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this week to halt the dangerous reopening of schools in the region. All those who are interested in joining this fight should contact us today.



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