

California's new COVID-19 restrictions place burden on workers and small business owners

David Fitzgerald
8 December 2020

New COVID-19 restrictions across several California counties began Sunday night, with more coming into effect over the next several days. Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom tied the measures to the proportion of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds available in several broad regions.

The stay-at-home order places the entire burden of the pandemic on workers and small business owners, closing outdoor restaurants and restricting retail shops' capacity without any financial compensation, while allowing major sources of transmission like large workplaces and factories to remain open for generating profits. While many schools in the state have moved to online instruction, part of the governor's guidance is that schools that have reopened to in-person instruction will not be closed.

In fifty-two of the fifty-eight counties in California, the pandemic is categorized as "widespread," meaning that there are high positivity rates for COVID-19 tests and large numbers of cases per capita. Only 339,811 Californians live in counties where the virus is not widespread in a state of 40,129,160 people.

California is now the worst-hit state in the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University, with well over 1.3 million cases as of Monday. New cases have increased by 84 percent in California in the past two weeks. The number of deaths in California has now nearly 20,000, with many cases likely uncounted. Los Angeles county broke single day infection records on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Sunday saw over 28,000 new COVID-19 cases, the highest recorded in a single day. Nearly one in ten Californians who are tested are positive.

Intensive care unit bed availability has fallen to exceedingly dangerous levels in numerous counties. Southern California is now at 10.3 percent ICU bed

availability, per the California Department of Health. As ICUs are stretched beyond their capacities, mortality rates will continue to climb. Lack of doctors, nurses, other health care providers and intensive care training compounds the crisis dramatically. A September report by National Nurses United revealed that 35,525 California health care workers have been infected, the most of any state. Only in New York and New Jersey have more health care workers died of COVID-19.

The new guidelines and restrictions suggest that residents refrain from holding out-of-household gatherings. Dining at restaurants, whether outdoor or indoor, is now prohibited, while outdoor religious services are exempt from restrictions. Film and television productions are also exempt. Retailers are allowed to conduct their business at 20 percent capacity as long as safety protocols are followed. Outdoor recreation facilities are allowed to remain open, as well as outdoor gym and fitness classes, while playgrounds will be off-limits for children.

None of these new restrictions will have any meaningful impact on the spread of the disease throughout factories, schools and many offices. In fact, childcare, pre-kindergarten and K-12 schools that are conducting in-person instruction will remain open, regardless of the lack of intensive care beds.

A new study conducted by University of California-Merced sociology Professor Edward Orozco Flores and Community and Labor Center Executive Director Ana Padilla reveal the remarkable ineffectiveness of the recent restriction measures by pointing out that counties with high numbers of low-wage workers, especially those deemed essential workers, are seeing far higher rates of infection.

Nearly all of the counties with high worker distress are on the state watch list for those with COVID-19

positivity rates above 8 percent. In comparison, only two of the 37 counties with low worker distress were above 8 percent. Worker distress is directly linked with higher infection rates. Tightly congested work environments, lack of safety measures, the flagrant secretiveness of management, and lack of health care options available to low-wage workers combine to create a public health disaster. The new public health measures will allow the virus to rip through the working class unimpeded.

Padilla emphasized that low-wage workers in agriculture, food services, transportation, and other essential roles have higher rates of infection. She noted that “our findings indicate low-wage work is associated with the spread of COVID-19, and that to mitigate COVID-19 spread it is not enough to simply regulate business openings and public gatherings.” The new restrictions clearly safeguard those who are able to stay at home, while disregarding essential and lower-wage workers.

Despite the limited nature of the new stay-at-home restrictions, sheriffs in Ventura, San Bernardino, Orange and Riverside counties have announced that they will not enforce them. These right-wing sheriffs have been emboldened by California Gavin Newsom’s blatantly hypocritical approach to restrictions.

Newsom has been exposed for eating out at extravagant restaurants in groups larger than state guidelines permit, and with these new measures places the entire burden of prevention on workers and small businesses. The state’s decision to declare almost every large workplace essential while refusing compensation to small business owners and working class families gives room for these right-wing sheriffs to posture as defending democracy.

During the initial lockdown measures beginning in March, Elon Musk’s Tesla Motors, located in Fremont California in the Bay Area, flagrantly defied government orders to close the factory floor. Musk ranted on Twitter about public health measures and was allowed to continue operations even as numerous cases broke out in his factory. This time around, Alameda County, where the Fremont plant is located, is making no effort to close the Tesla plant in the face of growing infection rates.

It is clear that the new restrictions are nowhere near sufficient to contain the virus. Nonessential work,

including car manufacturing, must be closed while providing full compensation to small business owners, families, and workers. Schools must provide fully-funded remote learning with guaranteed access to high speed internet. It is only possible to do this if workers take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file-committees. An incalculable number of lives can be saved through an active struggle of the working class against the financial oligarchy and their murderous “herd immunity” policy.



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