

Opposition erupts at San Diego State University following decision to cancel spring break

IYSSE at San Diego State University
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At a meeting of the San Diego State University (SDSU) Senate on December 1, the university president pushed for an impromptu vote on a decision to cancel the one-week spring break holiday for students in April.

Since the vote a little over a week ago, university administrators have faced a backlash from students. An online petition to reverse the decision has gathered more than 14,000 signatures, almost half of the school's 30,000 student population, in only a few days. A significant number of faculty members have also voiced their opposition to the move, which will increase workloads for both students and teachers.

The university has replaced the usual week-long spring break with a handful of "rest and recovery" days, which will amount to a few three-day weekends spaced throughout the semester.

The decision has been made on public health grounds, with the stated aim of discouraging student gatherings and travel that might occur during a five-day recess. In a letter to SDSU officials, San Diego Public Health Officer Dr. Wilma Wooten called for "avoiding the 9-day class gap" as a "proactive approach to protect our communities from preventable outbreaks."

"The extended, traditional break encourages travel for students," Wooten sated, "increasing their risk of exposure when flying or driving across states, putting their families and the SDSU community upon arrival, at higher risk of contracting the virus."

There is no question that discouraging travel and gatherings is absolutely necessary to prevent the spread of the virus. The pandemic is in an extremely dangerous phase, with new cases and deaths at record levels.

However, the university's decision is riven with hypocrisy. The university administration, acting in conjunction with the Democratic Party which controls the

state government, has created the conditions for the spread of the virus while providing students with no resources to cope with the stress of school and work amidst a public health emergency.

Anger among SDSU students has been building since the spring of this year, as the pandemic was first emerging. The university gave students mere days to move out of campus housing and levied heavy fines against them for extension requests. Then, in the fall, SDSU encouraged thousands of students to move into the dorms, offering single and combined dorms with up to four students in one small room.

The reckless policy led to more than 700 COVID-19 cases among students within the first month of reopening. By November, the total number of cases among students since the start of fall instruction reached more than 1,700.

As students began testing positive in large numbers, the university put hundreds of students into "isolation dorms" without more than 10 minutes to pack-up after staff in hazmat suits arrived at their doors.

Universities have become vectors for COVID-19 infections across the US, with campuses reporting more than 320,000 cases at more than 1,700 universities. Reopening has so far meant death for more than 80 college employees and an untold number of students, including 19-year-old Chad Dorrill of Appalachian State, 18-year-old Micheal Lang of University of Dayton, and 20-year-old Bethany Nesbitt of Grace College.

The reopening of the university was bound up with the broader campaign by the ruling class in the summer and fall, spearheaded by the Trump administration but supported by both Democrats and Republicans, to remove all restraints on the spread of the virus. In September, San Diego County officials petitioned Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom to remove SDSU's outbreak from the stat

e's official COVID-19 case count in the hopes of avoiding additional business restrictions.

Students signing the petition against SDSU's decision on spring break have pointed to the hypocrisy of the university. The comment that has the most likes on the petition (nearly 200) notes: "Do they actually care about making a solution for covid cases? No. If they did, they would close down the dorms, but they would never do that because they'll lose too much money for a second year. All they care about is money and an image that makes it seem like they're doing this for the greater good of society, when in reality they are screwing over each and every student."

Other universities have also cancelled spring break, and many students have expressed concern over what this will mean for their mental health during a period of profound strain. In response to the recent cancellation of spring break at the University of Michigan, one student wrote in a letter to the president stating: "College should not come at the cost of both my life savings and my life. This is exhausting far beyond the norm...the barrier between home life and schooling grows nonexistent. The break serves as the vital period during the hardest section of the year to actually get away from schooling."

Even as SDSU and other universities have taken action to cancel breaks, local and state officials insist that non-essential businesses and schools remain open.

The spring break decision has been made against the backdrop of Governor Newsom's recent statewide "stay-at-home" orders, which continue to permit the opening of workplaces and schools, as hospitals strain at 15 percent ICU capacity. Many students have continued working throughout the pandemic as "essential workers" in food service, retail, or in the gig economy as delivery drivers because nothing has been done to provide them with the necessary economic resources to live as the pandemic rages.

Last week, President-elect Joe Biden declared that "we're likely to lose another 250,000 people dead between now and January." However, he proposed no emergency measures to stop this catastrophe. Yesterday, Biden unveiled a proposal to supposedly combat the virus that includes a demand that schools remain open, which is seen by the ruling class as essential in keeping workers on the job.

Biden speaks for the entire ruling elite, which accepts the coming deaths of a quarter of a million people as inevitable, and he made clear last month that no matter what, "I'm not going to shut down the economy, period."

The ruling class is opposed to any measures that will either stop the pandemic or meet the educational, economic and mental health needs of students. By and large, students have been forced to handle the outbreak, and its subsequent challenges, on their own while being blamed for community spread.

Behind the anger over the cancellation of spring break is a broader issue. Yes, emergency public health measures must be taken to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The IYSSE warns young people and students that they must take the virus with deadly seriousness.

However, a serious response to the pandemic in the interest of public health requires an immediate closure of non-essential production and in-person schooling. This must be combined with the allocation of trillions of dollars to guarantee a monthly income for workers and youth, with full provisions and assistance necessary for students and educators.

There must be a cancellation of tuition and student debt so that students are not forced to sacrifice their lives and the lives of their loved ones as the pandemic rages out of control. Social resources must be mobilized to ensure that all young people have access to high quality education and mental health services amidst this public health emergency. The trillions handed to the financial oligarchy must be seized and allocated toward these basic social needs.

To fight for such measures, students must turn to autoworkers, nurses, healthcare workers, teachers, agricultural and food service workers and the entire working class in a political movement against the capitalist system.

The IYSSE of San Diego State University invites students and workers to attend a virtual meeting on the larger capitalist crisis under which the pandemic is unfolding, Thursday, December 10th at 5PM PST via Zoom. Further meeting information can be found at IYSSE.SDSU on Instagram or IYSSE_SDSU on Twitter, or via our sign-up link here.



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