

New York Times smears COVID-19 whistleblower Rebekah Jones

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On Friday the *New York Times* published an article aimed at smearing COVID-19 whistleblower Rebekah Jones.

Jones was fired from her position in the Florida Department of Health in May for refusing to manipulate data to support Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis' back-to-work and back-to-school campaign. She went on to help create and oversee Florida COVID Action and The COVID Monitor, the most comprehensive databases for tracking COVID-19 infections and deaths in Florida and in K-12 schools across the US, respectively.

In retaliation, Florida state police barged into Jones' home last week with guns aimed at her and her family. The officers seized her phone, computer and several hard drives, preventing her from continuing to publish data on COVID-19 outbreaks.

The *Times*, which provides the line of the Democratic Party, has not published a single denunciation of this vicious attack on democratic rights. Instead, the so-called "newspaper of record" is digging up completely irrelevant episodes from Jones' past in an effort to discredit her work in exposing the state cover-up of COVID-19 cases, and particularly the spread of the virus in schools.

In their main article on the raid, "A State Scientist Questioned Florida's Virus Data. Now Her Home's Been Raided," Patricia Mazzei attempts to discredit Jones' work and background.

Downplaying the significance of the attack on her, the *Times* refers to Jones' "tiff with the governor," as if what is involved is just a petty quarrel.

The *Times* then provides an account of the raid that is devoted largely to repeating the claims of the police. It asserts, for example, that police "denied that agents pointed their weapons at anybody and released body camera footage Thursday showing how agents repeatedly knocked on Ms. Jones's door and called her cellphone to announce the search warrant."

In fact, the footage itself shows a police officer pointing a gun at Jones, and the officer then enters the house with the gun. Footage released by Jones shows the police pointing a

gun up the stairs at her family. As for the warrant, Jones notes that she was only presented with it hours after the raid began, as officers were leaving.

In an attempt to further discredit her, Mazzei writes that "the search warrant served this week did not represent Ms. Jones's first brush with the law." It goes on to highlight criminal charges Jones faced in Florida involving a relationship with one of her students when she was a graduate assistant at Florida State University—none of which resulted in a conviction.

How any of these allegations have to do with, let alone justify, the fascistic police raid on her home and family is not explained. However, the implication is that Jones has a criminal past and perhaps is responsible for her present "brush with the law."

Mazzei then proclaims that "Ms. Jones has not been universally embraced as a whistle-blower," that "some critics [who?] have dismissed her lack of public health training," and that "others [who?] have been made uncomfortable by the attention she has sought." The "attention she has sought"? In other words, the *Times* is angry that Jones has tirelessly worked to get the truth out.

Such ad hominem attacks are a specialty of the *New York Times*. In particular, the *Times* played a leading role in attempting to slander WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange because of his role in exposing the crimes of US imperialism.

Similar motives are present in the campaign against Jones. Jones' work cuts across the campaign by the Democratic Party and the entire ruling class to send children back to school and workers back to work even as deaths from the virus spiral out of control.

Jones has been among the most outspoken advocates for keeping schools closed, repeatedly warning, on the basis of the data she has collected, that in-person learning is not safe and directly contributes to the spread of the disease.

In an article co-authored in *USA Today*, published December 2, Jones and her colleagues write: "Thanks to the efforts of our team, we have an improved understanding of

the effects of COVID-19 on American schools. Our data demonstrates that schools are not the safe havens or silos some believed they would be, and that they in fact contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in a number of ways.”

The evidence outlined in the article includes an analysis of their data, revealing that the high school student case rate is nearly three times that of elementary school students; that the higher the community case rate, the higher the school district case rate; and that the percentage of students enrolled for in-person classes directly impacts the case rate in school districts.

It is because of Jones’ exposure of the truth that the *Times* has been employed to cast her as a criminal.

In the only portion of the *Times* article dedicated to the actual substance of Jones’ work, Mazzei falsely claims that her data is manipulated: “Her dashboard shows a higher total number of cases than the state’s official records because it includes the number of positive antibody tests, something the Department of Health and outside epidemiologists do not recommend.”

The real culprit in manipulating data is the state. The entire strategy of the ruling class—to develop a “herd immunity” without a vaccine—has been predicated on the suppression of data and the falsification of science.

In the specific case of Florida, Jones told CNN that flash drives seized by the police in the raid on her home contained proof that Florida officials “were lying in January about things like internal reports and notices from the CDC,” as well as “evidence of illegal activities by the state.”

The widespread effort to downplay cases and manipulate data is necessary for states to justify the reopening of schools and the economy more broadly even as cases, hospitalizations and deaths continue to soar in Florida and across the country.

The *Times* has played the leading role in the campaign to keep schools open. It is notable that the word “school” or “reopening” does not appear once in Mazzei’s article. The *Times* consciously does not cite or refer to Jones’ work because it so decisively refutes their claims that schools are safe to reopen.

The *Times*’ efforts are directed by the needs of the Democratic Party. President-elect Joe Biden has made clear that he intends to keep the schools open. In a speech Tuesday, Biden stated, “It should be a national priority to get our kids back into school and keep them in school,” adding that he “will work to see that the majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days.”

A tragedy of unprecedented proportions is unfolding in the United States. and the ruling class, Democrat and Republican alike, is responsible. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the data collected and analyzed by Jones’

The COVID Monitor.

The dire situation facing workers and youth in Florida and throughout the country is recognized by scientists, data analysts and health experts. And despite the *Times*’ best efforts, Jones rightfully continues to have widespread support.

One data analyst wrote to the WSWS, requesting anonymity for their protection, and explained the situation in Jones’ home city, Tallahassee, on Friday:

Looking at local statistics, it’s clear we’ve entered the stage of exponential spread, characteristic of Covid. Our local district keeps a 14-day running total of k-12 positives at schools. In less than two weeks that number has went from 42 to 99 positives. Leon County hospitals are at capacity. There are no hospital beds for hundreds of miles. Looking at those two things alone, the timing of the invasion of her home isn’t surprising. A small part of me worries we are missing the bigger picture; something bigger coming down the road and silencing her was an advance move to clean up any strong dissent.

“Something bigger” certainly is on the agenda. No plans are being made to stem the coming tsunami of deaths from the virus in the months before a vaccine is widely available. Instead, information is being suppressed, science is under assault, and whistleblowers are being attacked.

The defense of Jones, of science, and of life will not come from either of the twin parties of Wall Street. If an opposition is to be mounted, it must come from the working class, independently organized on the basis of its own interest. The SEP calls on all workers and youth to oppose the assault on Jones and all whistleblowers and to fight for a comprehensive plan to contain the pandemic.



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