

California governor pressures schools to reopen as health care system nears collapse

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7 January 2021

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a national online meeting at 12 p.m. CST (1 p.m. EST) this Saturday, January 9, titled, “Stop in-person learning until the pandemic is contained!” We urge all educators, parents, students and workers who wish to join the struggle to close schools and nonessential businesses to register today and invite your coworkers and friends.

The state of California recorded its highest number of new COVID-19 cases on Monday at 74,000. Statewide, 96 new daily cases are now being recorded per 100,000 residents, 50 percent greater than the national average of 64 cases per 100,000, giving California the second-highest such figure in the nation, trailing only Arizona’s 112.

The most severe outbreak in the state has occurred in the Los Angeles metro area, which has become the national and global epicenter of the pandemic. As of Wednesday evening, 11,382 Angelinos have died thus far while 852,165 cases have been officially reported in a region of nearly 11 million people.

Over the past week, Los Angeles County has averaged roughly 13,800 cases and 183 deaths per day, among the county’s highest average daily death tolls. Since Christmas alone, at least 2,044 deaths have been recorded in the county.

As of Wednesday, Los Angeles County was hospitalizing 8,098 COVID-19 patients while 1,620 were in intensive care. Los Angeles now has zero percent ICU capacity, with ambulances waiting up to eight hours to offload patients, oftentimes until a bed becomes available due to another patient’s death.

Los Angeles hospitals are now openly being given directives as to which patients should be treated and which should be allowed to die. Ambulance workers have been told not to transport patients who have little to no chance of survival. Hospitals and ambulances have also been ordered to ration oxygen as supplies run critically low. Oxygen is only to be administered to patients with blood oxygen levels below 90 percent even though levels below 95 percent are considered to be below normal and possibly warranting medical attention.

Along with the increase of cases throughout California, there has been an overall decrease in the age of patients treated. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that Arrowhead Regional Center was seeing an increase in the number of

younger patients, and oftentimes without comorbidities associated with severe coronavirus cases. Referring to one 41-year-old intubated patient, Ravneet Mann, clinical director at the hospital, noted, “That’s our average age we’re getting. They’re coming in younger and coming in sicker.”

School-aged children, although less susceptible to the disease, are still highly vulnerable. Cases of child deaths are becoming more frequent as the virus spreads uncontrolled as part of the ruling elite’s homicidal policy of “herd immunity.”

In the midst of this deepening sickness and death, which is replicated to a somewhat lower degree throughout large parts of the state, California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom recently announced that the state will provide \$2 billion in funding to cash-strapped districts with the proviso that they must resume in-person learning. According to Newsom’s plan, schools in much of the state should begin fully reopening as early as February.

“As a father of four,” Newsom cynically stated, “I know firsthand what parents, educators and pediatricians continue to say: in-person is the best setting to meet not only the learning needs, but the mental health and social-emotional needs of our kids.”

The “Safe Schools for All” program initiated by the Newsom administration falsely claims that in-person learning can be done safely amid a raging pandemic. The plan states that the “right precautions can effectively stop the spread of COVID-19 in schools, especially in elementary schools.”

Newsom and the California Department of Health falsely argue that the health risks to children and surrounding communities from reopening schools are negligible. They claim that children are infected less often than adults and are less likely to fall ill from the disease, when in fact 2,128,587 children tested positive for COVID-19 in the US in 2020, representing 12.4 percent of all cases.

One study, cited by Kaiser Health news, found that the infection rate among children mirrors that of the communities in which they live and that in Los Angeles County, for example, a school with 500 students or greater is 98 percent likely to have at least one student who’s infected. “Where there is already widespread community transmission, as is the case in many areas in the U.S., there is clearly a risk of spread

associated with reopening schools,” according to the report. “This challenge may be more pronounced where testing and contact tracing is limited.”

The reopening of New York City schools is being falsely presented as a “success story” to justify the reopening of schools in California, when in fact there has been a surge of the pandemic since schools reopened throughout the state. In New York City, students and educators are randomly tested in each open school building once a week, and the monthly total of those tested must add up to 20 percent of the school’s total population. This testing regime—including the frequency, quality and reliability of results—is largely considered a joke by New York City educators and parents.

Newsom’s plan to reopen schools is clearly meant to satisfy the requirements of the incoming Biden administration to fully reopen schools within his first 100 days in office, should he even assume the presidency.

In this campaign, the Democrats have the full support of the teachers unions, who promote the same fraud that schools can be reopened “safely.” An end-of-year statement by the California Teachers Association (CTA) stated, “There’s no one more eager than educators to be in classrooms with all students, where we know they learn best.”

The Oakland Education Association (OEA), which betrayed a powerful strike of city teachers in 2019, tweeted their approval of Newsom’s reopening plan, stating, “We’ve been calling for these things all along—safety standard standards, testing, data collection, funding. Schools must open not according to an arbitrary timeline, but when they are actually SAFE FOR STUDENTS.”

The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which rammed through a contract they gave teachers only three hours to read in order to end a two-week strike in 2019, has similarly called for school reopenings. In doing so, they have invoked the racial politics advanced by Biden’s pick for Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, arguing that remote learning primarily disadvantages students of color. The answer, according to the UTLA, is not better financing of remote learning, but rather putting all students in dangerous in-person settings.

For her part, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten approvingly cited comments by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City condemning the decision to close down several New York schools and go fully remote in the midst of escalating COVID-19 cases. “The real answer for New York,” the UFT wrote, “is making the vaccine immediately available to all school personnel. We can’t let bureaucratic snarls and procedural delays endanger the safety of students, school staff and their families.”

As Weingarten and the UFT well know, vaccine distribution has been woefully inadequate and a prioritization of school personnel on paper will do nothing to actually provide the vaccine to school staff.

Thus far, the state of California itself has received just under 1.3 million vaccines, with only 454,000 distributed. Based on the current rates of vaccine distribution it will be impossible to prevent an explosion of COVID-19 cases in the three-month timeline provided for full school reopenings by Newsom.

The \$2 billion funding amount proposed by Newsom comes under conditions in which the state faces a looming \$23 billion budget deficit over the coming year. With districts facing financial collapse, the state is offering a pittance in order to compel them to reopen, so that businesses can fully reopen and ensure the steady flow of profits to the financial oligarchy.

The only appropriate public health response to the exploding pandemic is the full shutdown of schools and non-essential industries and the provision of full compensation for workers and small business owners. In addition, all necessary supports for remote learning must be provided to every student and educator, including high quality laptops, software and high speed internet access for all students who need it. This program must be paid for through the expropriation of the ill-gotten and astronomical fortunes of the state’s ultra-rich, which includes 165 billionaires.

Across California, educators are becoming radicalized and fighting to unify with broader sections of the working class. Rank-and-file safety committees, wholly independent of the unions and capitalist parties, have been formed in San Diego, Los Angeles and Northern California. We urge all educators, parents and students across the state to join and help build these committees, beginning by attending this Saturday’s national online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Register today at wsws.org/edsafety and invite your coworkers and friends!



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