

Experts warn Hawaii on the brink of major COVID-19 outbreak and hospital overcrowding catastrophe

Angelo Perera
5 February 2021

Despite its relatively low case numbers, the state of Hawaii is on the verge of a major COVID-19 outbreak which is just weeks away. The Healthcare Association of Hawaii warned *Hawaii Public Radio* on January 8 that by February 19 hospitals would reach full capacity, noting that hospitalizations were up by 77 percent in the previous two weeks. The warnings about a coming wave of cases has faced a near media blackout as the state pushes to reopen schools.

The site Covidactnow.org, which tracks statistics, has labeled Maui as being on the verge of an outbreak with zero ICU capacity available. The Hawaii State Department of Health (DOH) reported 92 new COVID-19 cases on Thursday, bringing the statewide total to 26,187.

Significantly, Hawaii's effective reproduction rate (R_t) was 1.12 according to data gathered from *rt.live* on January 27—the second highest within the United States. This means that every infected person is spreading the virus to 1.12 other people. The data collection site *rt.live* is owned by Instagram, and recently stopped publicizing data. It projects a message on its page arguing that with the administration of vaccines, the R_t figure is no longer of value and that one should “never rely too heavily on a single metric.” The suspension of this aggregated data raises concern, particularly since the virus is still spreading out of control throughout the United States, and it remains undetermined to what degree the vaccines—which have so far only been administered to a small segment of the population—slow the spread of infection in the population.

Adding to the concern is the February 2 announcement by DOH officials that analysis pointed to the possible spread of the highly transmissible

B.1.1.7 UK variant in Hawaii. The DOH says it will release definitive proof by the end of this week once the genome sequencing is completed. However, state officials and the media have sought to downplay the news and insist that no changes to current health and safety protocols are necessary at this time.

Just last week, Hawaii acting epidemiologist, Dr. Sarah Kemble, announced that scientists have also detected a variant associated with California outbreaks among seven patients on Oahu, one on Maui and one on Kauai, proving that opening travel to and from the mainland has resulted in increased infections. In mid-October, Hawaii arbitrarily reduced its quarantine period from 14 to 10 days, allowing travelers with a 72-hour-old negative coronavirus test to bypass quarantining altogether. Traveling to Oahu from another Hawaiian island requires no test nor a quarantine. Significantly, all four COVID-19 deaths reported on Wednesday were from Oahu.

Acting in the interest of the ruling class and tourist industry, Hawaii state officials have refused to adopt the lockdown measures needed to curb the spread of the virus and have pushed the reopening of tourism while downplaying the degree of community spread. Maui, which has a population of 167,417 has a test positivity rate of 7.1 percent, far above the 5 percent guideline outlined by the World Health Organization for coming out of a lockdown.

Maui only has a total of 31 ICU beds and 38 ventilators, meaning that even a moderate surge in cases will easily overwhelm the system. With the threat of a major outbreak looming, the situation facing medical workers remains dire throughout the state where hospitals are already nearing capacity. Across

Hawaii there are a total of 339 ICU beds, and 196 of them are currently occupied. Lanai—the island owned by Oracle billionaire Larry Ellison—has a single hospital with just four critical care beds.

It is under these conditions that the Hawaii Nurses' Association (HNA) Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 50, forced a contract on nurses at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children, averting a strike.

Significantly, none of the nurses' demands were met in the contract, which the union pushed through and nurses were unable to read before the vote. The major concerns of nurses, including a lack of access to new N95 masks, an end to the multi-use of masks, and the dangerous policy of caring for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients on a single shift remain unresolved.

A nurse from the Kapiolani Medical Center spoke with the WSWS and expressed dissatisfaction on how OPEIU Local 50 quickly pushed the sellout contract as a victory to the nurses. "The Union said the nurses won, but nurses didn't feel that way at all! The hospital has continued to run out of equipment since the beginning of the pandemic. A nurse got COVID-19 and they said it was community acquired. The hospital showed massive disrespect toward nurses." The outcome of the vote tally has not been made public. Ninety-three percent of nurses voted in favor of authorizing the strike out of concern for the safety of patients and staff.

While the coronavirus continues to spread, Hawaii Governor David Ige is pushing to return to in-person teaching by offering to vaccinate school employees as essential front-line workers. Although 18,200 school employees have signed up for vaccinations—half of the teacher worker force—reports show that only a small percentage have actually received the first dose of the vaccine. The Hawaii State Teachers Association has enthusiastically endorsed this plan, stating that teacher vaccinations "will open up safer opportunities to increase in-person learning options." The necessity of vaccinating the entire population, including students, and the families of teachers and students has not been raised by the union.

Meanwhile, data continues to reveal that school openings facilitate the spread of COVID-19. On August 20, around the time that many K-12 schools were returning for classes in the US, child cases totaled

442,785—9.3 percent of the 4.76 million total cases for all ages. By November 12, the number of total cases had risen by 87.5 percent to over 9 million. Child cases, in turn, had risen by 135 percent to 1.04 million.

The WSWS is warning the teachers of Hawaii that they must not allow Ige and the trade unions to force them back to the classroom while the virus continues to spread out of control. Teachers must join forces with nurses, doctors, emergency medical workers and other workers to demand their safety be placed as the prime concern over profits and the dictates of the capitalists. The disaster facing Hawaii can only be reversed by the united action of the working class. We urge all workers to form independent rank-and-file action committees, to take the conduct of this struggle to end the pandemic into their own hands and fight for a socialist transformation of society.



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