CDC pushes US schools to reopen “at any level of community transmission”

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On Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released its latest iteration of guidelines on reopening schools in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines are thoroughly unscientific and politically motivated to justify opening schools and keeping them open no matter what.

These are the first such guidelines issued under the Biden administration, which has continuously stated that reopening the majority of K-8 schools across the US is its central domestic policy. Facing widespread opposition from teachers who know schools are not safe, the entire political establishment has united in its demands that schools reopen.

The guidelines are designed to facilitate this policy regardless of the level of community spread in a given school district, stating, “*At any level of community transmission*, all schools have options to provide in-person instruction (either full or hybrid), through strict adherence to mitigation strategies” (emphasis added). In other words, even if citywide test positivity rates reached 80, 90 or 100 percent, schools can stay open for in-person learning.

While the present CDC leadership and the Biden administration claim to adhere to scientific principles and appear more polished than Trump and his cronies, their basic framework represents a continuation of the homicidal herd immunity policies pursued by Trump. The guidelines were released days before the nation surpasses the grim milestone of 500,000 deaths, aptly described as a result of policies of “social murder” and a deepening of decades-long trends.

The underlying motives of the Biden administration are the same as those of Trump. They seek to resume fully in-person learning in all school districts that currently provide remote instruction. This is aimed at pressuring the maximum number of parents to return to dangerous workplaces to produce corporate profits.

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki declared, “The president will not rest until all schools are open five days a week.” Last month, Biden’s top economic advisor Brian Deese bluntly stated, “We need to get the schools open so that parents, and particularly women … can get back to work.”

Millions of teachers voted for Biden believing that he would represent a more humane alternative to Trump, who would understand their plight, given that his wife is an English professor. The brutal reality that the Democratic Party is equally beholden to Wall Street is becoming clearer each day. The Biden administration is now pushing school reopenings at a time when the number of daily new cases far exceeds that which existed when Trump first pressed to reopen schools last July, and the Democrats hypocritically denounced him.

On Friday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten described the CDC’s new guidelines as “informed” and “rigorous.” Seeking to quell teachers’ growing skepticism and hostility towards the CDC and the Biden administration, she added with a straight face, “I can assure you that this is free from political meddling.”

The executive summary begins by stating categorically, “It is critical for schools to open as safely and as soon as possible, and remain open.” They outline “five key mitigation strategies” which they claim provide the “safe delivery of in-person instruction and help to mitigate COVID-19 transmission in schools” These include the following: “Universal and correct use of masks; physical distancing; handwashing and respiratory etiquette; cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities; and contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, in collaboration with the health department.”

None of the above conditions are realistic or have been met by any of the thousands of school districts that have reopened since last July. As a result of school reopenings, there have been over 643,000 COVID-19 infections of students and staff in K-12 schools across the US, according to the COVID Monitor website curated by whistleblower Rebekah Jones.

In an effort to tamp down teachers’ expectations that they might get vaccinated before being sent back to unsafe schools, the guidelines explicitly state, “Access to vaccination should not be considered a condition for

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reopening schools for in-person instruction." Alongside COVID-19 testing programs, this is simply an "additional layer" that districts should try to prioritize after meeting the above five "key mitigation strategies."

The word "ventilation" appears twice in the 33-page document, with the CDC merely suggesting that school districts "Improve ventilation to the extent possible such as by opening windows and doors to increase circulation of outdoor air to increase the delivery of clean air and dilute potential contaminants."

Scientists have long understood that SARS-CoV-2 is an airborne virus that readily travels in confined spaces, yet there is no suggestion that funding be provided to improve heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. A US Government Accountability Office report from last June noted that 54 percent of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools. Roughly 36,000 schools nationwide need HVAC updates.

The guidelines advocate contact tracing, isolating and quarantining, but fail to note that the resources for these programs are virtually non-existent.

After noting that "multiple SARS-CoV-2 variants are circulating globally" which "seem to spread more easily and quickly than other variants," the guidelines simply state that "adherence to mitigation strategies is essential to control the spread of variants of SARS-CoV-2." If things get out of control, "mitigation strategies and school guidance may need to be updated to account for new evidence on risk of transmission and effectiveness of mitigation."

All key aspects of the CDC guidelines are antithetical to the latest science on SARS-CoV-2 and its variants, which proves unequivocally that closing schools is an essential component of any broader strategy to contain the pandemic.

The timing of the guidelines' release is highly significant. The CDC waited until the day after Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began reopening, following an intense struggle by rank-and-file educators to oppose this reckless policy.

In their struggle, Chicago educators were vilified by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the entire corporate media, and behind the scenes the Biden administration and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten were directly involved in the negotiations process. Biden's new CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky also intervened last week, stating, "Vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools."

Given its marching orders, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) rapidly struck a deal with CPS which the union rammed through as quickly as possible. Jesse Sharkey—former leader of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO) and CTU President since 2014—played the critical role of using the threat of a strike against teachers, saying that this would lead to legal repercussions and teachers should accept school reopenings.

The precedent set in Chicago—the third largest school district in the US—combined with the pseudo-scientific CDC guidelines, will be used as a battering ram to reopen schools across the US and globally. The next major targets for reopening include Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, Nashville and other Democrat-led cities, as well as high school students in New York City, Chicago and any other districts that so far only have plans in place for K-8 students. In each of these cities, the unions have collaborated with local Democrats to reopen schools or will do so in the coming days.

The same policies are being pursued globally. Bourgeois politicians are collaborating with the unions to press for schools to reopen in Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, Colombia, Canada, France, Germany, Turkey, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, India, Myanmar, Cameroon and other countries. In each of these countries and more, educators are entering into struggles to oppose these policies.

Educators in every country must build rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the bourgeois parties, and fight to link up with their most powerful allies in the working class. There must be an intransigent struggle to close all schools and non-essential workplaces, expropriate the pandemic profiteers, and use their wealth to fully fund remote learning and all other resources workers and students need. Only once the pandemic is contained and the population vaccinated can society begin to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces, which must all be retrofitted with state-of-the-art technology.

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