

Oregon and other US states prioritize vaccinating educators in order to boost profits

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The state of Oregon and at least 28 other states have placed teachers in Phase 1 of the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine as part of the effort to resume in-person learning as quickly as possible. This policy is being promoted by the teachers unions as the CDC released its latest guidelines on school reopenings last Friday, encouraging districts to open schools “at any level of community transmission.”

Oregon’s Democratic Governor Kate Brown, with the support of the Oregon Education Association, has spearheaded the policy of vaccinating teachers before the most vulnerable sections of the population, announcing their plan on January 15. Teachers began to receive first doses on January 23. Most day care, preschool and K-12 school employees have been eligible to receive the vaccine since January 25.

Many educators have opposed this policy, requesting that the vaccines instead be given to those at higher risk of contracting or succumbing to the virus, including essential workers, the elderly, and those with chronic illnesses. At a controversial press conference on January 15, Brown responded to these criticisms by doubling down on the position that schools need to be reopened “as quickly as possible.”

By denying the vaccine to elderly age groups in order to prioritize teachers, the state is allowing dozens if not hundreds more people to become infected and die from COVID-19. According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, “People over the age of 65 make up about 16 percent of the U.S. population, but 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths. 91 percent of all deaths in Oregon have been in those 60 and older, despite making up just a quarter of the state’s population.”

Governor Brown could not offer a scientifically justified response to criticisms from the press, instead asserting that students suffer most when schools are shut down. She blamed the mental health crisis among young people on remote learning rather than on the real underlying cause: the homicidal policies of the state. Further, she ignored the

mental health consequences of young people bringing the virus home to their families, which will far outweigh the consequences of remote learning.

The unstated but overriding concern is the desire to reopen the economy as quickly as possible, which requires schools to effectively serve as childcare so parents can go back to work. Brown constantly stressed that she is working directly with the Biden administration, whose top economic advisor Brian Deese recently stated, “We need to get the schools open so that parents, and particularly women... can get back to work.”

State officials admit that it could take months for every education worker to receive two doses, even if elderly age groups’ eligibility is pushed back. The director of the Oregon State Health Authority promised to vaccinate educators over a two week period, but the *Oregonian* recently reported, “It could take up to four weeks to provide only a first shot to early learning and K-12 employees.” Further, this schedule “assumes virtually no vaccinations for seniors 80 and older who will soon qualify.” As of Monday, state residents aged 75 and over are eligible to start vaccination, but the 70-plus group must wait until February 22 and 65-plus until March 1.

Events in Oregon are taking place as part of a national campaign to rush the reopening of schools, which is now overseen by the Biden administration. Last week, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) rammed through a deadly betrayal of its membership to reopen Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the US.

During the negotiations in Chicago, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky intervened publicly and insisted that “vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools.” Within days, the CTU caved on their initial demand that teachers should only return to schools when vaccinated, settling for having 1,500 out of roughly 25,000 CTU members vaccinated each week and having teachers return before receiving both doses of vaccine.

The entire premise that schools can reopen safely as the

pandemic rages out of control—regardless of whether or not educators are vaccinated—is false and unscientific. Numerous studies have demonstrated that implementing these policies will lead to an explosion of cases and deaths.

Even if teachers are successfully vaccinated in Phase 1 of distribution, children are a significant factor in the spread of COVID-19. The European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has openly acknowledged that children are susceptible to the virus and do transmit the disease. Antoine Flahault, director of the University of Geneva's Institute of Global Health, admitted that children and young adults are infected just as often as adults. A study conducted in southern India came to the same conclusion. British prime minister Boris Johnson has been forced to admit that “the problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

The rush to reopen schools, led by the corporate media, the entire political establishment and the teachers unions, is unfolding as COVID-19 cases continue to surge through the population, with a 7-day average of 99,565 cases as of February 12. Up to 20,400 deaths are expected to be reported from February 8 to March 6, amounting to a total of 540,000 deaths in the US alone.

Further, the B.1.1.7 variant first discovered in the UK is forecast to become the dominant lineage in the US by late March. This variant is more infectious and lethal than the wild type of the virus, and the capacity for the vaccines presently available to mitigate the most severe symptoms of this new variant is still an open question. There are reports that the B.1.1.7 variant could be 30 to 70 percent deadlier than the wild type of the virus.

The B1351 variant first discovered in South Africa carries two mutations that have shocked the medical community. One mutation, called N501Y, make the virus far easier to spread. Another mutation, E484K, allows the virus to avoid the immune system more effectively. It has also been shown that certain coronavirus vaccines are worse at preventing infection from this coronavirus variant.

Medical scientists are still unsure of what effect the vaccine will have on the spread of the virus, given the new variants. It is probable that those who have been vaccinated will still be capable of spreading the virus to others, even after receiving both doses of the vaccine. Stanley H. Weiss, M.D., an epidemiologist and professor at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School and the Department of Biostatistics & Epidemiology at the Rutgers School of Public Health, has stated that the risk of transmissibility after vaccination is “greatly diminished, but not eliminated.”

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is a living organism that will continue to evolve as it is allowed to rip through the

population. Dr. Katherine O’Brien, director for Immunizations, Vaccines and Biologicals at the World Health Organization (WHO), stated that vaccinations are not sufficient for making schools or communities safe, noting, “risk of variants relative to the vaccines is ever greater when the transmission is very high in the communities. Not only because of variants that have occurred, but because of the possibility of additional variants emerging under the pressure of vaccines.”

O’Brien asserted, “We have to emphasize the importance of really crushing transmission now while we are rolling out these new vaccines.” The drive to reopen schools directly contradicts the advice of the WHO, regardless of whether or not teachers are vaccinated.

The closure of schools has been crucial in limiting the transmission of the virus and preventing death. A JAMA study published last July 29 found a 62 percent decline in infections per week when a state closed its schools statewide. The mortality rate dropped 58 percent per week when schools were closed.

The policy of “social murder” is being exacerbated by providing the vaccine to teachers before the most vulnerable individuals in society, under conditions where teachers and students could safely stay home and learn sufficiently with well-funded remote learning programs. The elderly and those who are immunocompromised or have preexisting conditions will receive the vaccine only after teachers are providing in-person instruction.

A struggle must be waged by educators and workers across the US against the unions, state and local governments of both parties, and the Biden administration, all of whom seek to implement a homicidal policy. The drive to reopen schools is due to the need under capitalism to extract surplus value from the working class. The financial oligarchy will take any measure to boost their profits and is ready to sacrifice the population on a global scale to maintain this course.

Educators across the US and internationally have heroically resisted the homicidal policy of “herd immunity.” The lessons of the Chicago teachers’ struggle to save lives must be assimilated. The unions are functioning as a branch of management and the state. Educators must appeal to workers around the world and build rank-and-file safety committees for the preservation of life.



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