

Los Angeles officials press to reopen schools, citing bogus “threshold”

Tom Hall**17 February 2021**

The campaign to reopen schools in the United States reached its next phase Monday night, when Los Angeles County officials declared that the city's school district, the second largest in the country, has been “cleared” to reopen.

The announcement was first made via a tweet by Janice Hahn, a member of LA County's Board of Supervisors, who wrote that the county has “officially reached the State's threshold for reopening elementary schools” and that schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) could open as soon as the following day.

Although local officials are pushing for schools to reopen as quickly as possible, a timeline has not yet been set. The ultimate framework through which the Democrats will seek to pry open LA schools will come through negotiations with the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), following the template established by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) last week.

The UTLA, whose leadership is hailed as “militant” and “progressive” by the same pseudo-left forces such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who have praised the CTU leadership for years, sold out a strike by LA teachers in 2019.

If successful, the reopening of LAUSD will lead to further outbreaks and deaths, particularly with the rapid spread of newer and deadlier strains of the virus. It must be opposed by teachers and workers throughout the city, the state of California and the country, who must demand instead the shutdown of schools and nonessential industry in order to contain the pandemic once and for all.

Teachers across the US and internationally, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties, are forming networks of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to coordinate and develop opposition to school reopenings.

“We all know it's BS,” Ric, a fifth grade teacher in LAUSD, told the WSWS. “They just want everyone back to work so they can get back to profits as usual. These ventilation systems, like in my school, are old and frequently break down.”

Elizabeth, a nurse from Lakewood, commented, “It's dangerous to reopen schools before getting the majority of the population vaccinated, especially now with the new variants circulating more than ever. The fact that teachers spend hours speaking to students, and students speaking back to them, puts them at risk for infection. And being in the same room for several hours with poor ventilation is also risky.”

The announcement in LA comes amid a relentless nationwide campaign, spearheaded by the Biden administration, to put children back into school buildings in order to send their parents back to work producing profits for the ruling class. It follows last week's reopening of schools in Chicago with the collusion of the CTU, as well as the release of the politically motivated school reopening guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which allow for schools to reopen under all levels of COVID-19 spread.

The media propaganda campaign to promote school reopenings continues in full swing. On Tuesday, the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post* published an article claiming that “education advocates” are slamming the CDC guidelines for not going far enough. In reality, these “advocates” are a handful of cherry-picked “health experts” and one self-described “education entrepreneur.”

The push to reopen schools continues in major cities throughout the country, with most run by Democrats. In Baltimore, elementary schools are scheduled to begin reopening on March 1. In Detroit, learning centers are scheduled to reopen next Wednesday. In Philadelphia, reopening plans have been dealt a blow by a job action taken by district teachers.

This campaign is reaching a fever pitch in California, where city officials in both Los Angeles and San Francisco have sued their own school districts for their alleged failure to provide pathways to reopen schools. In Santa Barbara County, just west of Los Angeles, 10 out of 20 school districts have already reopened, in some cases for months. In San Diego, 35,000 students are already back in classrooms

full time, and three districts in the city are applying for waivers to reopen high schools.

Plans to reopen schools in January fell through after the state experienced a massive surge over the winter and became the new epicenter of the pandemic in the US, surpassing New York for the most deaths from COVID-19. Los Angeles, in particular, remains a major center of the virus, with 1,936 new cases on February 10 alone. The city is still classified by the state's internal metrics as in the most severe “purple tier,” indicating widespread community transmission.

However, under the guidelines worked out by the administration of millionaire Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, schools are allowed to reopen for K-6 in-person classes even under these conditions, as long as the daily case rate dips below 25 per 100,000 people for five consecutive days, a metric which was met on Monday. This completely arbitrary figure means that schools can reopen in LA County, the country's most populous with more than 10 million residents, with as many as 2,510 new infections per day.

By comparison, a case rate of 25 infections per 100,000 would amount to 82,000 per day for the entire country, a threshold which far exceeds the first and second peaks last spring and summer.

While new cases have continued to decline, in line with much of the rest of the country, the health care situation in California remains extremely fragile. The rollout of vaccines has been disastrous, with only 6.1 million doses administered out of the 79 million required to vaccinate the entire population.

LAUSD will only open its first vaccination center for school employees later this week. However, because of extremely limited supplies, vaccinations are by invitation only and restricted to employees over the age of 65 or those working at testing and vaccination sites.

The campaign to reopen schools in the US is part of a global effort by the ruling classes in each country. A strike by Brazilian teachers in São Paulo, the second largest school district in the Americas, took place last week but was sabotaged by local unions. In South Africa, 1,493 teachers had already died from COVID-19 by mid-December, according to government figures. The South African government was also recently forced to abandon its vaccination program using the AstraZeneca vaccine due to the emergence of a new strain that is resistant to the vaccine. Despite these staggering developments, schools around the country reopened on Monday.

In every country, efforts to reopen schools are accompanied by relentless propaganda campaigns, promoting lies that schools are “safe,” that they are not

major vectors of transmission and that school-age children are not at risk if infected. In fact, the overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates that closing schools is among the most effective ways to contain the spread of the disease.

The stated aim of the Biden administration—to reopen most of the country's school districts by April 1—intersects disastrously with the rapid spread of new and more dangerous strains of the virus, with the B.1.1.7 UK variant forecast to be dominant in the US by late March, potentially producing another major surge of the virus. In Florida, which has had among the least restrictive pandemic measures under right-wing Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, 10 percent of new cases are of the more infectious UK variant, according to government figures.

Moreover, there is an increasing body of evidence that children are at risk of severe health complications after contracting the virus, especially through the potentially deadly Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C). Over 2,000 cases have been confirmed in children in the US, and 30 have died, according to CDC figures.

A recent article in the *New York Times* noted that cases of MIS-C have tended to be more severe in recent months, with the proportion of those patients admitted to hospitals needing intensive care increasing to 90 percent, compared to 50 percent in the early phases of the pandemic. This trend has baffled specialists, who have yet to discover any definite explanation.

The *Times* authors, however, fail to acknowledge the elephant in the room: If more children are becoming seriously ill and dying after catching COVID-19, how can this be reconciled with the newspaper's continued insistence that schools are safe for reopening?

More and more, educators and workers are emerging as the central force advocating for a scientific and rational approach to fighting the pandemic, in opposition to the murderous “herd immunity” policies of the capitalist ruling class. This opposition must be consciously developed and armed with a socialist program to put an end to the pandemic and restructure society based on the principles of social equality, science and economic planning on a world scale.



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