

US ruling class moves to remove remaining restrictions as pandemic continues to spread

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3 March 2021

As the United States enters the second year of the coronavirus pandemic, the death toll continues to rise at a colossal 2,000 a day, most recently passing the 530,000 mark. Even at the “reduced” rate of 60,000 to 70,000 new infections a day, the total number of Americans who have contracted COVID-19 will reach a staggering 30 million people by March 15. By the end of April, one in every ten Americans will have contracted this potentially deadly disease.

The American ruling class is proceeding, however, as though the pandemic was all but over. In the most extreme cases, the states of Texas and Mississippi have ended all restrictions related to COVID-19, including the statewide mask mandate and any limitations on business operations. “People and businesses don’t need the state telling them how to operate,” Republican Governor Greg Abbott said during a Texas chamber of commerce event, where he was naturally applauded by his audience of millionaires.

Abbott is only the most egregious flouter of public health concerns. He has been joined over the past two weeks by dozens of other governors, Democratic and Republican, in easing COVID-19 restrictions.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam has eased limitations on bars, restaurants, large-scale entertainment venues and even sports arenas. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer took similar action Wednesday, saying she would “enable Michiganders to enjoy more of life’s simplest pleasures.” Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf increased the permitted attendance at sports and entertainment facilities. All three are Democrats.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has criticized the actions of the Texas and Mississippi state governments, without actually naming them. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky warned that the apparent stabilization of the number of new infections, at a level considerably below the horrific toll of December

and January, did not justify relaxation of social protections against the pandemic.

“At this level of cases,” Walensky said, “with variants spreading, we stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground we have gained. These variants are a very real threat to our people and our progress. Now is not the time to relax the critical safeguards that we know can stop the spread of COVID-19 in our communities, not when we are so close.”

The CDC has not applied these public health concerns, however, to the most significant policy measure threatening to accelerate the spread of the pandemic throughout the US population: the Biden administration’s drive to reopen all public schools to in-person learning by the end of the president’s first 100 days in office, that is, by April 29, 2021.

Biden himself called the actions by Texas and Mississippi “Neanderthal” on Wednesday. However, in defiance of countless scientific studies that demonstrate that public school classrooms packed with students are a major vector for spreading the pandemic, the Biden administration has launched what *Politico* called a “blitz of action to prod schools to reopen.”

The first action taken by Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, after he was sworn in officially on Tuesday night, was to announce the convening of a “national summit on safe school reopening” for later this month, with the participation of teachers’ union leaders, to promote the back-to-school campaign on the basis of a phony concern about “addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of students.”

On Wednesday, in his first public event, Cardona toured reopened schools in Pennsylvania and Connecticut accompanied by First Lady Jill Biden.

Biden announced Tuesday that he was revising the federal guidelines for the distribution of vaccines to reclassify educators as frontline “essential workers,”

effectively moving them up in the vaccination queue so that every teacher would be eligible to receive at least the first shot of a two-shot vaccination by the end of March.

This designation as “essential workers” is not a favor to teachers, but rather potentially places them under the same threat as meatpacking workers and others compelled by the federal government, under the Defense Production Act, to report for work or else. And it ignores an overriding danger of in-person schooling: that students, who cannot yet be vaccinated, will contract the virus, either from each other or from teachers and other staff (who may still be infective even if they are vaccinated), and the children will bring the virus home to their parents and grandparents.

Funding for the school reopening campaign is a major aspect of the “recovery” legislation now being debated in the Senate after passing the House last Friday. It accounts for \$170 billion out of the \$1.9 trillion bill. As part of the federal campaign, the Department of Education will begin tracking where each state and school district stands in terms of reopening schools, figures that the Trump administration declined to collect.

The Biden administration is also reportedly discussing the appointment of a “school reopening czar” to spearhead the campaign. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten—perhaps auditioning for that position—declared, “I’m glad that the White House is actually saying that schools should reopen within the first 100 days, which every state in the nation should have prioritized months and months ago.”

Both the Democrats and the Republicans are pursuing the same fundamental policy and defending the same social interests: the demand of big business, Wall Street and the major banks for a restoration of “normal” capitalist exploitation of the working class. Children must go back to school so that their parents can be forced back to work, regardless of the danger to their health and lives from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A prominent article posted on the *New York Times* website Wednesday underscores the profit interests that are at stake. The article focuses on the “back-to-office” plans of major corporations, which presently have only one fourth of their workers going into their offices, observing, “Many companies, paying to rent empty office space, are eager for that number to rise.” The article reports, “Another major consideration revolves around the children of workers. Companies say they can’t make firm decisions until they know when local schools will reopen for in-person learning.”

This sums up the basic issue: Corporations want workers back to work, and they need a firm reopening date for local schools. Here is the class basis of the Biden administration’s fanatical drive to reopen the schools and give corporate America what it wants, and in its first 100 days, no less.

The historical resonance of the “first 100 days” of an administration comes from the New Deal of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which pushed through a raft of major social reforms in that period, during the worst depths of the Great Depression. Biden’s “first 100 days” is attached not to a social reform, or anything which would benefit the working class, but to carrying out the dictates of Wall Street in a way that will do incalculable damage to millions of workers and their families.

The positive advance of mass vaccination makes it all the more criminal to expose *anyone* to the danger of infection, let alone millions of teachers and tens of millions of school children. And the threat that the coronavirus can mutate into versions that are more infectious or more resistant to vaccination makes a policy of permitting mass infection that much more criminal and irresponsible.

The Socialist Equality Party has spearheaded a campaign diametrically opposed to the homicidal policy of the Democrats and Republicans. We call on teachers and other education workers, supported by parents and students, to form independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school, to fight for a complete lockdown of all schools until the coronavirus pandemic is defeated.

This should be combined with a vast mobilization of society’s resources to expand online education and make it available and productive for every child. The logic of this struggle is to fight for the socialist overturn of existing property relations, a vast redistribution of wealth, and the rebuilding of society in the interests of the working class.



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