

Arizona governor fully reopens schools and businesses with union backing

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Arizona Republican Governor Doug Ducey issued a draconian executive order on March 3 which requires schools to reopen by March 15 or following spring break, followed by another order on March 5 to reopen all businesses to 100 percent capacity, only leaving the mask mandate in place.

On the governor's official website, Ducey said, "Arizona's students need to be back in the classroom. More than half of Arizona's schools are open and offering in-person options. More schools need to follow their lead, and pave the way for equitable education options for every Arizona student."

The reopening of Arizona schools is being perpetrated with the full support of the Arizona Education Association (AEA), which is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), and the Arizona Educators United (AEU)/#RedForEd grouping affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The AEU was founded and headed by Rebecca Garelli, who also founded the National Educators United (NEU), which fulfills a similar function as the AEU on a national level.

The news release states in unequivocal terms, "According to metrics developed by the CDC, 12 of Arizona's 15 counties are in phases where all schools are safe to open, including in the state's two largest counties, Maricopa and Pima."

The "metrics" are mere suggestions by the CDC, which stated in its *Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools* document, "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." No school has been shut down for violating said "mitigation strategies."

By any objective scientific measure, Arizona schools and non-essential businesses are not safe to open. According to the CDC's own map, as of March 11 all but two of the 15 counties in the state are in either a "high" or "substantial" risk of community transmission, with the remaining counties in the "moderate" category.

Among the worst effected were Maricopa and Pima counties, which have experienced the most deaths in the whole state with 9,300 and 2,285 respectively. Maricopa County added 28 deaths on Thursday, according to the county's website. According to the latest figures from the American Association of Pediatrics, Arizona has had over 1,600 hospitalizations and a 1.2 percent hospitalization rate among children ages 0-19 and at least 24 child deaths. According to the John Hopkins University of Medicine, Arizona as a whole has a test positivity rate of 10.39 percent, with only 12.02 percent of the population fully vaccinated.

Echoing the fraudulent pseudo-scientific statements made by the Biden administration's CDC, Ducey continued, "The CDC and numerous health officials have said time and time again that schools are safe and kids can go back to the classroom. We prioritized teachers in our vaccine distribution, and many have already received their second dose. The science is clear: it's time all kids have the option to return to school so they can get back on track and we can close the achievement gap."

If Ducey were honest about his motives, a more appropriate statement would be, "The science is clear: schools are a major vector of coronavirus, but the large corporations and Wall Street that bankroll us need profits. So we are reopening."

Schools have been established by numerous studies to be one of the main vectors for coronavirus, and closing in-person schools has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to curb its spread. The new UK variant, which has been confirmed to exist in Arizona, is expected to become dominant in mere weeks. It spread quickly among the younger population in the UK and Italy, leading to a surge of hospitalizations among school-age youth.

The head of the Arizona Education Association, Joe Thomas, was interviewed on a local PBS affiliate on the reopening of schools, in what has been his only public statement on the reopening which will affect thousands of his own union members.

When a reporter asked what his "immediate reaction to the

executive order to have all students back in person by March 15” was, Thomas stated that:

“It’s really curious, most districts are either already in-person or were heading there just after spring break. Let’s remember that the governor, about a year ago, had passed this decision and planning down to the local school districts on how to meet the educational and safety and health needs of our students, and districts by and large have worked with parents and educators to do just that for a year. And so *that is why it’s really curious to see the governor suddenly come out and really show how far away he is from understanding the good planning and all of those good conversations that have happened*, to indicate everybody is going to be on the same page on the same arbitrary date.”

In other words, Thomas has no disagreement with Ducey on reopening schools, criticizing the governor only for failing to recognize the “good planning” that school districts and the union have already made to reopen schools! His statement shows that the AEA is hostile to the interests of teachers and parents and works as an arm of the ruling class to enforce its dictates, not even stopping for something as fundamental as the very safety and lives of its membership.

Thomas went on to complain that the mandated opening date, March 15, interfered with date set by some schools to prepare for reopening, and that the order would cause disruptions to schools which already planned a “cool off” week after the break.

The AEU and its head Garelli not only remained silent on this betrayal but have said nothing at all in opposition to Ducey’s order. She is a known quantity, having played an instrumental role in suppressing the revolt by Arizona teachers in 2018, helping the AEA and national unions isolate and betray the powerful strike. Garelli, who is a Phoenix DSA member, is on the DSA’s 12-member Democratic Socialists Labor Commission’s Steering Committee. At the Young DSA winter conference in late February, she made a telling statement that “Our [AEU’s] first program was to close schools, and *now that has evolved*.” If that statement is to mean anything, it is that the AEU’s program is to support school reopenings.

A Tucson Unified teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Our district had decided to send us back on the 22nd and 23rd to start setting up our classrooms, with an in-person start date for the 24th. Now with the governor’s order, we will be in-person on the start date of the 22nd. This is right after spring break.”

Angela Skillings, another Arizona teacher, said, “Ducey undermines education. Not only has Ducey ordered schools back this month, he has lifted the ban for restrictions on businesses so that they can reopen 100 percent.

“Why don’t we just stay virtual? It’s working! We do

have a few kids on campus who need support, and I feel like we should keep that in place for those high need students, but not open for the rest of the school population.”

Last summer, Skillings and two of her co-workers were forced to work together in-person in a classroom, despite the fact that they were teaching their students online in virtual summer school. One of Skillings’ co-workers, Kim Byrd, died from COVID-19, and Skillings and her other co-worker contracted COVID. Skillings has still not been able to be vaccinated, although she says that around 70 percent of the school’s 62 faculty members have been vaccinated.

“I go by my experience,” said Angela Skillings. “If the three of us who were educated and we were on campus because you said we would be safe if we followed protocols, and we weren’t safe—now, you are going to put me in a classroom with 12 children? I don’t feel safe.”

The executive orders come after the provocative actions on the floor of the US Senate by Arizona Democrat Kyrsten Sinema, who ostentatiously “thumbed down” the \$15 minimum wage provision, which had been proposed as part of the federal relief package. She had also reportedly brought cake on the day of the vote for Senate staffers, drawing comparisons on social media to Marie Antoinette.

A former member of the Green Party, Sinema was elected with the support of the AEA and #RedForEd, although the latter has since attempted to distance itself from her. Garelli has retweeted posts critical of Sinema while failing to acknowledge the critical role #RedForEd played in her election.

This reopening takes place exactly one year after schools were shut down, and teachers need to draw the necessary conclusions. They need to form rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions, the Democrats and the pseudo-left groups like the DSA and AEU who work to redirect opposition back into the unions. These rank-and-file safety committees must fight for a political general strike to shut down in-person learning and non-essential businesses.



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