Inland Empire schools reopen as infection rates remain high in Southern California

Peter Ross
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The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees are organizing the enormous opposition among educators, parents and students to the homicidal reopening of schools throughout the region. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends to attend our next meeting at 2 p.m. PST this Saturday!

Elementary schools in the Inland Empire—a region inland of Los Angeles which is home to some four million people—began opening to in-person instruction last week. This reckless move takes place even though the region remains in the state's most dangerous "purple tier" classification, which designates infection rates higher than seven per 100,000.

Riverside and San Bernardino counties, the two largest counties in the Inland Empire, are overseeing some of the most aggressive school reopening plans in the state. Elementary schools in San Bernardino County were approved to resume in-person classes on February 24. In Riverside County, the Corona-Norco Unified School District resumed in-person instruction for elementary school students on March 1. Riverside Unified School District followed on March 8, and three more districts—Murrieta Valley, Palo Verde and Desert Sands—plan to reopen next week.

The drive to reopen schools in the Inland Empire is part of an aggressive and reckless push to open schools across California and the entire West Coast, which is the final region in the US where the majority of large school districts have not yet reopened. Since taking office, the Biden administration has spearheaded this campaign with the full collusion of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates.

Under state rules in California, elementary schools can reopen when new infections fall below 25 per 100,000 residents, an extremely high benchmark which ensures that all but the hardest hit counties can begin their reopening plans immediately. Preschool and elementary school students are resuming in-person instruction under a hybrid model in which students are divided into morning and afternoon groups, in order to decrease class size.

While high schools and middle schools remain online for now, they can reopen in a given county once it moves from the purple tier to the red tier. Riverside County is planning to reopen middle and high schools as early as April 1.

Last week, state officials announced that seven counties in Northern and Central California—El Dorado, Lassen, Modoc, Napa, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo and Santa Clara—would be moved to the red tier, clearing the way for a reopening in those districts. Upon reclassification, San Francisco Unified School District immediately approved a tentative agreement to resume in-person instruction starting April 12.

Schools across the state are being pressured to reopen following an agreement between the state legislature and Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom on March 1 allocating $6.6 billion for schools that reopen by March 31. In what amounts to bribing financially strapped school districts to reopen, the deal stipulates districts that have moved to the red tier would have to resume in-person instruction for elementary school students and at least one grade in middle school and high school in order to receive the additional funding.

The most critical role in facilitating the reopening of schools is being played by the teachers unions. On Tuesday, the leadership of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) reached a tentative agreement with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest in the country, to resume in-person

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instruction in April. This abject betrayal follows the model set by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) last month, and if approved will set a precedent for reopening schools throughout California.

Across the country, the reopening of schools has been an unmitigated disaster, leading to at least 675,000 COVID-19 infections among students and staff, according to the COVID Monitor curated by whistleblower Rebekah Jones. The dangers are now compounded by the spread of new, more virulent strains of the virus, including the B.1.427 variant that emerged in California last summer and has become the dominant strain in the state.

This variant is expected to account for as much as 90 percent of the state's infections by the end of March. It appears to reduce the effect of antibodies in neutralizing the virus and has likely contributed to the rapid spread of the disease throughout the state.

Alfonzo, a UPS worker in the Inland Empire, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Before working for UPS, I was a substitute teacher. If there's one thing I learned, it's that the classroom is the most fertile ground for any infection. That is exactly where you catch anything, and all teachers know it.

"Schools here in the Inland Empire are being reopened basically not for educational purposes, since that could be accomplished remotely, but as day care centers where working people drop off their kids while they need to go back to work. And that is not a choice they are making voluntarily. Capitalism is pushing them into very hard decisions. For example, most families cannot live on one salary and the pressure to get out there is enormous.

"There are also school staff that are not being mentioned in the media. These are people, like janitors and cleaning crew, who are being sent back to work, and I don't think they are being offered hardly any type of protection. Yet, they are the staff that make schools run. Now with the danger of variants, what will happen to them?"

The efforts to send hundreds of thousands of students and educators into poorly ventilated classrooms throughout California and the West Coast region will be disastrous and has already provoked an outpouring of anger on social media among educators, parents and students.

This opposition must find conscious expression through the building of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions and both big business parties. Such committees now exist in Los Angeles, San Diego, Northern California, as well as in Michigan, Texas, Tennessee, New York City, Chicago and other cities and states across the US and internationally, with plans to form committees in Oregon, Washington and throughout the West Coast region.

We urge educators, parents and students in Riverside, San Bernardino and throughout the region to sign up today to help build rank-and-file committees at every school and workplace to fight to implement the lockdown measures necessary to contain the pandemic and save lives, while providing full compensation to all workers affected. Sign up today to get involved and make plans to attend Saturday's meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees!

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