

Washington state governor set to declare state of emergency to force reopening of schools

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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!

Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee announced on Friday that he will soon issue a legally-binding emergency order requiring Kindergarten through 6th grade students to begin "hybrid instruction," a mix of remote and in-person teaching. School districts will be required to begin implementing this order by April 5, and by April 19 all students must be provided the option for in-person instruction.

Inslee has not only ignored warnings from medical professionals around the world by issuing this decree, but has blatantly revealed his contempt for public health. He recently stated, "If I had a nickel for every excuse I have heard for not giving our children on-site instruction, I would be a millionaire. These excuses are getting just a little tiresome, frankly."

Some of the so-called "excuses" include the following: there have already been over 545,000 deaths caused by COVID-19 in the US alone, more deadly variants are spreading throughout the country and are expected to become dominant in the coming weeks, and numerous studies reveal schools are major vectors for the spread of the virus.

By April 19, teachers will be required to have at least 30 percent of their teaching hours conducted within classrooms for K-12 students. Inslee attempted to quell concerns by insisting that he is not focused on pressing criminal charges against teachers who defy his orders, but he insidiously added, "We have full expectations that it will be fulfilled."

The executive order will seek to use the suffering of students as a rationale for returning to in-person

instruction. However, the seemingly endless prolongation of the pandemic has always been the inevitable consequence of the policies of the ruling class and politicians from both big business parties that have subordinated workers' lives to the pursuit of profit.

Inslee's order follows last week's order issued by Oregon's Democratic Governor Kate Brown, who ordered all schools to reopen by April 19. Both Oregon and Washington governors have ordered teachers to receive the vaccine during Phase 1B, long before more at-risk sections of the population will receive the vaccine. Underscoring the bipartisan character of the reopening drive, these orders follow that of Arizona's Republican Governor Doug Ducey on March 3.

Inslee's order comes just days after the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) agreed to begin the reopening of Seattle schools on March 29, as part of the reckless drive to resume in-person learning across the US and globally.

Earlier this year, SPS Superintendent Denise Juneau recommended the return to in-person learning for pre-kindergarten and special education students to begin on March 1, which the school board supported unanimously. However, on February 26 the school board suddenly changed the date, announcing that students would begin returning to classrooms on March 11. The school board then voted again and almost unanimously agreed that school staff who work with students will be classified as "essential workers."

In Burien, south of Seattle, the general membership of the Highline Education Association (HEA) voted on March 4 to not return to in-person instruction until April 19. However, the union then rushed through a vote on a separate deal compelling to teachers to return to in-person instruction on March 11. The teachers had been sent a threatening email from Highline Public Schools Superintendent Susan Enfeld, announcing that she would

be enlisting numerous substitute teachers and that those teachers who refused to return to in-person instruction would be subject to “progressive discipline.”

What these rapid reversals, threats and snap votes reveal is the haphazard and anti-democratic nature of the return to in-person instruction. This chaotic process is also characteristic of what is taking place in Turkey, Brazil, Germany and numerous other countries. The political and financial interests forcing the return to in-person instruction are not willing to allow the continuation of remote learning, which hinders their ability to extract profits from parents at home with their children.

The decision to reopen Seattle schools coincided with an announcement by Inslee that all counties in the state would move to Phase 3 of his reopening plan on March 22. Restaurants, bars, gyms and other businesses will be able to reopen with 50 percent occupancy, while sports stadiums will be allowed 25 percent occupancy and high school sports can resume. Inslee has pledged that the state will return to the more restrictive Phase 1 only ICU capacity reaches 90 percent, at which point deaths will have increased dramatically, but this pledge cannot be taken at face value.

The rush to reopen schools at the end of the school year is a continuation of the international “herd immunity” policy of the ruling class, which seeks to make the virus endemic regardless of the mass suffering and deaths this will entail.

The drive to reopen schools is proceeding while there have been repeated warnings of a spring surge of the more infectious and lethal COVID-19 variants. Dr. Rochelle Wolensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recently stated bluntly, “I think the next two or three months could go in one of two directions. If things open up, if we’re not really cautious, we could end up with a post-spring-break surge the way we saw a post-Christmas surge. We could see much more disease. We could see much more death.”

New variants of the virus, especially the B.1.1.7 variant first discovered in the UK, have dramatically increased these dangers. The BMJ (formerly the British Medical Journal) recently established that this variant is 64 percent more deadly than the wild strain of the virus and is far more transmissible.

This new variant is expected to become dominant in the US by the end of March. Dr. Michael Osterholm, Minnesota Infectious Disease Research and Policy Director, commented on the situation. “We’re opening up America like it hasn’t been opened up since March,” he

said. “There will be a lot of people who don’t want to hear this. They will be angry. But in fact, if we look at what’s happened in Europe, in the Middle East, unless they were locked down, they could not control that virus. So, how are we going to pivot, quickly, from opening everything and saying, ‘wait a minute, that’s not the answer.’”

A study released January 18 and conducted in Quebec revealed that when schools returned to in-person instruction, cases among students and teachers rose far faster than the general population. There was a 17 percent increase in infections among children ages 0 to 9 after schools had returned to in-person instruction. The consequences are likely to be worse in the US, where transmission rates are higher and schools have contended with massive austerity cuts.

The SEA, HEA and all the other teachers unions in Washington fundamentally agree with the corrupt politicians mandating the reopening of schools. Following the line of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) at the national level, the teachers unions everywhere ignore the warnings of Osterholm and numerous medical experts throughout the world, running roughshod over the wishes of rank-and-file educators. SEA president Jennifer Matter has consistently stressed her agreement with SPS, recently stating, “Of course we want to get back into the classroom to serve students.”

The policy of herd immunity, which demands the reopening of schools, represents a direct threat to the lives of working people internationally. Educators and workers around the world are joining rank-and-file safety committees to put forward their interests and defend their lives. An internationally coordinated shutdown of all nonessential production, with full income compensation to workers and small businesses, is required to put a stop to the ruling class’s criminal policy of social murder.

We urge all educators, parents and students in Washington to build a Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today to become the force of opposition to school reopenings across this state. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends to attend Saturday’s meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.



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