

Indiana ends mask mandate as state's COVID-19 cases climb

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On Tuesday, April 6, the state of Indiana will completely lift its already inadequate measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Republican Governor Eric Holcomb announced the decision last Thursday during his weekly address on the pandemic. This is despite rising infections in the state, as in most of the US. Holcomb also said last Thursday's event would be his last weekly address on the pandemic until further notice.

In states across the country, governors are removing whatever minimal restrictions remain despite rising infection and hospitalization rates and warnings from public health officials and scientists of a "fourth wave" of the pandemic, fueled by the unsafe reopening of schools and the spread of new and more virulent variants of the coronavirus. On a global scale, the deadly pandemic is surging in developed countries (France, Italy), where the vaccination program is disorganized and chaotic, and in poorer countries (India, most of Africa), where the vast majority of the population has little prospect of being vaccinated.

Virtually all capitalist governments around the world, whatever their political coloration, are deliberately subordinating the containment and eradication of the virus and the protection of human life to the profit interests of the corporate-financial elites. In the US, the herding of workers back onto unsafe job sites in order to maximize the flow of profit is being carried by both parties. The Biden administration and the Democrats pursue the profit-driven back-to-work and back-to-school campaign with greater duplicity than the Republicans, but no less ruthlessly.

The focus of Holcomb's address was the announcement that effective March 31, all state residents 16 and older will be eligible for the COVID vaccine. This was used as a cover for the abandonment

of even the most minimal efforts to halt the spread of the virus. Indiana State Health Commissioner Dr. Kristina Box began the announcement of expanded vaccine availability with the declaration, "Today is the day we have all been waiting for!" as though the pandemic were a thing of the past.

While a slight dip in the statewide positivity rate has been observed since the last major spike, which took place in December of 2020, when Indiana led the nation in positive cases, the situation remains extremely serious. The positivity rate hovered at 10 percent in the last week of March, with 1,240 new cases and nine new deaths. With the lifting of all restrictions, these numbers are virtually certain to rise. Total cases in the state are near 695,000, with over 13,000 deaths.

Marion County, which includes the Indianapolis metro region, remains the area with the most significant number of cases. With Indiana being the most heavily industrialized state in the US, several factories and workplaces have been centers for COVID-19 transmission.

The rank-and-file safety committee formed at the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Columbus has reported numerous workplace infections since the beginning of the pandemic, along with the company management and union bureaucracy's complete disregard for workers' safety. As reported by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, Allison Transmission in Indianapolis saw 135 cases in 2020, with the United Auto Workers (UAW) playing the role of corporate accomplice by keeping workers on the job.

Schools remain a primary vector for infection, but Indiana, in line with the bipartisan push at the national level to reopen all schools, is moving forward with openings. As of Saturday, 450 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in schools across Indiana by the State

Department of Health.

Of the new cases, 341 occurred in students, 50 occurred in teachers, and 59 occurred in school staff. This follows the decision of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to retract its previous six-foot social distancing guideline for the resumption of in-person instruction and the announcement of a three-foot guideline. This completely arbitrary change is based not on science, but rather on the insistence of Wall Street and the corporations for a more rapid reopening of industry. As a number of Biden officials have stated openly, the reopening of schools is critical for herding their parents back into factories and offices.

In addition, the CDC removed its guidance for the quarantining of students exposed to the virus, as long as the three-foot separation is observed.

In the rare cases requiring quarantining, according to the new leadership of the CDC appointed by Biden, students can return to class after 10 days of being symptom free. They even can return after a seven-day quarantine if they are tested on day five, six or seven and get a negative result. A negative test on day eight will also allow a student to return.

The loosening of the CDC guidelines will lead to increased transmission. According to the Indiana State Department of Health, from the beginning of the pandemic to the present, 30,075 students, 5,948 teachers and 6,947 staff members have tested positive in the state. Reporting by all schools is not mandatory, and 288 schools have yet to issue a report since the start of the pandemic, meaning the number of infected students and teachers is undoubtedly much higher than the state health department's figures.

"We cannot behave as if the pandemic is over," said Dr. Box during the weekly address, after which Governor Holcomb proceeded to announce measures that amount to doing just that. Holcomb was asked about the difficulty of reinstating restrictions once they have been lifted, should the spike in the statewide positivity rate continue to grow. His response was to evade the question while placing the blame for the new rise in cases on the working class.

"It's not just one number I focus on," he said. "We do want to do all we can do to reduce the spread. This is not 'mission accomplished.' There is some personal responsibility to be demanded."

The lifting of the mask mandate comes at the worst

possible time. The more transmissible B.1.1.7 strain, first identified in the UK late last year, is now becoming the dominant strain in the US, with the CDC reporting 11,500 cases. The epicenter appears to be Florida, spurred on by spring break festivities, with noticeable pockets forming in the upper Midwest as students return home. In addition to being more transmissible and more deadly, there appears to be evidence that the new variant affects younger individuals more easily than the previous strain of the virus.

It is clear through its actions that the state government has no concern for the health and safety of the working class. In this disregard, it is joined by the Biden administration and the ruling class as a whole. Workers, educators and youth in Indiana must take matters into their own hands. The WSWS encourages the formation and linking of rank-and-file safety committees in schools, factories, workplaces and communities across the state, as part of a national and international struggle.



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