

Opposition mounts among US workers to repeal of mask mandate

Shannon Jones
18 May 2021

Opposition is mounting among teachers, service workers and industrial workers to the new COVID-19 safety guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that essentially eliminate masking or social distancing requirements for vaccinated individuals in most settings. The new guidelines have been issued under conditions where nearly two-thirds of the US population is not fully vaccinated.

Without a way to determine who is vaccinated and who is not, the rule means that large groups of unmasked people will be allowed to congregate indoors, including at mass events, ensuring the wider spread of the virus.

Anger has been compounded as state and city governments one after another along with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the supposed workplace safety watchdog, have fallen into line behind the CDC. In an update posted on its website Monday, OSHA instructed employers to follow the new CDC mask guidance for people fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Major retail chains such as Trader Joe's, Costco, Walmart and Meijer, Target, CVS Health and Starbucks have already dropped their requirement that customers wear masks. Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced Monday that most local government authorities would be barred from requiring masking.

The drive to eliminate all safety protocols and force the full reopening of the economy is being pushed by the Biden administration with the support and cooperation of the unions and the heads of major corporations.

This was underscored by Biden's visit Tuesday to the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan where he appeared side-by-side with United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble. The president praised the UAW for its collaboration with the auto companies and said it would have to be deepened to "win the competition of the 21st Century," particularly against China, in dominating new electric vehicle production and supply chains. "The future will be made in America," Biden declared to the applause of the company and UAW officials.

The UAW, meanwhile, has made clear its support for the elimination of the limited safety protocols implemented last year following a wave of wildcat job actions by autoworkers in defiance of the unions in Europe, the US, Canada and Mexico. In a statement last week, the United Auto Workers said, "We are working to clearly understand these new CDC guidelines and coordinating with the companies."

The decision to do away with masking requirements—under conditions in which the deadly virus is not contained and there are more than 30,000 new COVID-19 infections and over 500 deaths each day—is criminal and reckless. The discovery of new, dangerous, variants compounds this danger. The risk was highlighted recently by the death from COVID-19 of autoworker Mark Bruce at the Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant outside Detroit and that of another worker at the Faurecia Saline, Michigan facility.

A Ford worker in Ohio reacted to reports that the UAW was considering dropping COVID-19-related safety protocols on facemasks. "Sell outs all the while they sit home in their isolation bubble. The entire time we have had to come into these factories."

"Homicidal is a big word....but fits the current facts," another worker said.

While the major US auto producers as of Tuesday had not announced any changes to their masking policies, several major auto parts suppliers, including BorgWarner, Penske Automotive and Lithia Motors Inc., said they would eliminate masking requirements as soon as states allow it.

The CDC rule change is also being used to push for the full reopening of public schools to in-person instruction as part of the drive to get workers back in the factories making profits for business. Just hours before the CDC announced its change in guidelines American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten issued a statement declaring, "There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week."

Reacting to Weingarten's statement, Kuhea, a public-school teacher in Hawaii, said, "It's so disappointing to hear Weingarten promote a message that places so much false

hope on the vaccine to avoid committing the time, care, and money needed to safely return to normal. We must collectively resist dangerous efforts to reopen schools and businesses to protect ours and others' lives. We have leaders that do not care about doing the right thing by others.

"People are buying in to that messaging. Maui's beaches are crowded with tourists as if there is no pandemic. The airlines dangle a cheap fare to Hawaii, and people so quickly throw caution out, endangering everyone. Now, a mask is optional if you've been vaccinated. Crazy!"

In response to an article posted on social media regarding Utah Governor Spencer Cox lifting all mask restrictions in K-12 schools, another teacher noted, "Damned CDC. This is exactly the kind of foolish wrong interpretation I anticipated after the CDC made its mask suggestions for *VACCINATED* people."

The practical impact of the dropping by the CDC of masking requirements is to force workers to choose between being exposed to unmasked individuals in the workplace or lose their jobs. Millions of retail workers, logistics and factory workers, already facing significant risk of exposure due to lack of adequate social distancing, will be put in further danger.

The CDC advisement on demasking flies in the face of the recommendations of epidemiologists who warn that the population should continue to wear masks in large indoor settings until at least 80 to 90 percent of the population is vaccinated.

The change in the CDC guidelines was a political decision, not a scientific decision. It is a signal that the ruling class intends to end all efforts to contain the pandemic. Insofar as health and safety measures impinge in the slightest on the profit drive of the super wealthy, they must be eliminated. The result of this policy in the US, Latin America, Europe and large parts of the world has already been mass death. Daily deaths and infections are at near record levels globally.

In reaction to the decision by major retail chains to drop their masking requirements for customers, there was furious opposition on social media from medical professionals, shoppers and store workers.

One worker posted on Facebook: "Not only dangerous and ignorant, but asinine as well if they will not require proof of vaccination. I can hear the anti-vaxers cackling with glee. This undermines all the progress that's been made in stemming the spread of COVID. This is literally sickening."

A medical doctor posted on Twitter, "The long and short of it is that it's a terrible idea to unmask now. ~36% of the population is fully vaccinated. We can unmask when 70%+ are fully vaccinated and the National case number is below 100 per day."

One post on Twitter pointed to the economic interests behind the CDC decision. "It makes sense if you look at it through the lens of the oligarchs who own this government want the serfs to get back to work. It's all about \$\$\$ in the USA. That's what they care about, not us. If they cared, we'd have universal healthcare & a livable wage."

Another person wrote, "This is false. The idea that there is zero risk if you're vaccinated is a load of rubbish. The goals are 1) to stop people dying by getting vaccinated and 2) to stop variants. We need to get to 75-90 percent vaccination rates globally to achieve goal 2. Until then? Masks?"

Under conditions where the pandemic is exploding globally and new, deadly variants are arising, the ending of even the limited safety protocols by the US government is reckless and guarantees that the virus will become endemic, that is, it will take its deadly toll year after year. Workers are being told they must accept this state of affairs and "get on with their lives."

The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to develop a class-conscious opposition to the policy of the ruling class to allow the virus to spread unchecked. We insist on the prioritization of human life over corporate profits. The ICFI has called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unify the international working class in opposition to the anti-worker trade unions and capitalist political parties. To win this fight, workers must be armed with an internationalist and socialist perspective aimed at the abolition of the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact