

After CDC changes guidelines, states across the US ban or lift mask mandates

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In the aftermath of last week's announcement by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that they recommend vaccinated people no longer wear masks indoors, numerous states led by both Democrats and Republicans have followed suit by removing mask mandates.

This reckless escalation of the reopening campaign, under conditions in which only 37.5 percent of the American population has been fully vaccinated, will inevitably lead to a surge of infections and deaths in the coming months. The vast majority of children have not been vaccinated, with those under 12 years old not approved for vaccines. More infectious and lethal strains of the virus are spreading throughout the US, with the potential to become totally resistant to the vaccine.

The revision to the CDC's guidelines was completely unplanned, catching states and authorities off guard and creating a free-for-all to fully reopen and unmask across the US. Giant retailers such as Costco, Walmart and Target have recently adopted the CDC's policy, along with Trader Joe's, CVS, Chipotle, Starbucks and other major corporations, leaving service workers defenseless against anti-maskers.

This takes place under conditions of a labor shortage, a looming economic crisis, and rising inflation. Last month, consumer price inflation rose by 4.2 percent compared to April of last year, with 31 percent of restaurant company leaders stating in a survey that they closed stores because of a lack of workers, with another 44 percent stating that they were considering doing so.

Hoping to stave off a collapse of its assets, Wall Street is clamoring for a complete reopening of businesses to revive the economy, in the process forcing workers back into unsafe working conditions. In tandem with the complete lifting of mask mandates, many states are announcing the end to the \$300 weekly federal boost to state unemployment. On Monday, Texas Governor Gregg Abbott joined at least 19 other Republican-led states that have dropped federal unemployment benefits within the past two weeks.

In New York, the fourth-largest state with nearly 20

million residents, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the implementation of CDC guidelines on Wednesday. The conditions are being created for another mass outbreak of the disease in New York City, once the epicenter for the pandemic, which incurred over 33,000 deaths. According to the city government, only 39 percent of New York City residents have been vaccinated.

Pennsylvania has already adopted the CDC's guidance, along with Delaware and Connecticut. California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has announced that the most populous state will adopt the guidelines on June 15, with Hawaii delaying implementation as well.

Maryland and Virginia have both removed their indoor mask mandates. Just days before the CDC's announcement, South Carolina banned mask mandates in all settings and for all populations, including schools, leaving the masking of children to the decision of individual parents. On Wednesday, Utah passed a special session bill to ban face mask requirements in school beginning with the next academic year.

On Tuesday, Texas Governor Gregg Abbott issued an order banning mask mandates, with local governments or county officials threatened with a \$1,000 fine for mandating masks. Only state-supported living centers, government-owned or run hospitals, and jails and prisons are exempt from the ban, with schools set to be unmasked by June 6 under this order.

The dictatorial orders in Texas follow in the footsteps of other Republican-led states such as Florida, which issued a ban of masking orders and a repudiation of pandemic restrictions on May 3 that exempts only schools, and South Carolina's May 11 order which encompasses both schools and local governments.

Miranda, a teacher in Austin, Texas, has had Long COVID after being infected when her school reopened. After initially having a mild infection, she has since suffered from numerous long-term and debilitating complications. She commented:

As a vaccinated individual I feel protected from COVID-19, but my children have not been vaccinated as they are too young... I will not unmask when it means that I could potentially give my nine-year-old twin daughters a deadly virus. Everyone has to remember that the vaccine just limits you to having a mild infection and my life is an example of what a mild infection can do.

Victimized Texas teacher Michael Hull stated in response to Abbott's order banning masks:

Greg Abbott is yet again putting Texans' health at risk to pander to his political base. We don't know exactly when the vaccine wears off, how effective it is against new variants, or who around us is vaccinated. Nevertheless, the risk of increased transmission, new mutations, and death is just the "price of liberty" according to Republican armchair jurists who decry the tyranny of masks.

Of course, like seat belts, masks are an appropriate public safety precaution, and a temporary one at that. Conflating this with an infringement on personal liberty is a big reason why the United States has had the worst pandemic numbers in the world. This shouldn't be up for a debate.

Republicans like Abbott take the most brutal measures that will lead to mass infections among children, of which Texas has more than 5 million enrolled in Texas schools. An estimated 10-15 percent of children experience Long COVID, meaning that hundreds of thousands of Texas children could potentially experience long-term or even permanent illness, in addition to the inevitable spike in deaths from infections in the broader unvaccinated population. While the Republicans take the most extreme right position, the Democrats and the CDC adapt themselves to these positions, being in fundamental agreement as representatives of the capitalist class.

The CDC's blatantly unscientific and homicidal policy was implemented after the purging of officials from the agency who were viewed by CDC director Rochelle Walensky as insufficiently pro-reopening. The head of the COVID-19 vaccine task force, Nancy Messonnier, went on leave in late April and officially resigned a week before the May 13 declaration by the CDC that vaccinated people can remove masks in any kind of gathering. Messonnier, a 20-year veteran of the CDC, was replaced by Henry Walke

days before she left. The CDC's second-in-command, deputy director Anne Schuchat, recently stated that she plans to retire this summer.

Politico, citing three senior health officials, noted: "Behind the scenes, Walensky had decided that the vaccine task force should be placed squarely under the oversight of the agency's senior leadership, rather than reporting both to CDC brass and the White House." In effect, Walensky is consolidating her control over CDC policy to more quickly repudiate public health policies in the interests of fully reopening the economy.

Politico noted that Schuchat's departure was "one of the first high-profile departures from CDC during the pandemic, despite the months of pressure and attacks the agency had weathered from the Trump administration." That is, where Trump failed to bully the CDC into complete submission to the political aims of the administration of reopening everything, Biden has succeeded.

The same Politico article notes that at the end of March and early April, several officials inside the CDC argued that the science was against unmasking and that changing these guidelines "could signal that it was safe for all Americans to forgo adhering to public health measures," while other senior officials argued for revisions to the mask mandate.

Walensky, in light of the resistance by some in the CDC, restructured the agency's pandemic modeling and data, analytics and visualization task forces, along with Messonnier's position, which now reports directly to Walensky. This indicates that further reckless modifications to the CDC's guidelines could be expected in short order from these task forces. They are now under the strict political supervision of Walensky, who evidently has no qualms with falsifying science in pursuit of the political interests of the Biden administration.



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