

Global school reopenings pose massive threat to children

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The global surge of the COVID-19 Delta variant, the most infectious so far, poses particular dangers to children who remain largely unvaccinated globally. Well aware of these risks, governments worldwide are nevertheless deepening their drive to fully open schools for the upcoming semester.

In Brazil, where the Gamma variant has been dominant and the Delta variant is now spreading rapidly, a July 20 report from *Uol* noted that COVID-19 has already killed 1,581 young people aged 10 to 19 in just the first six months of 2021, becoming the leading cause of death by disease for that age group. An additional 1,187 children under 10 years old have succumbed to the virus since the start of the pandemic, with Brazil experiencing the highest number of child fatalities from COVID-19 in the world.

In the UK, where daily new cases have skyrocketed by over 1,500 percent in the past two months, one in seven of all UK students, 1.05 million children, are presently either infected with COVID-19 or in isolation due to exposure to the virus. Children's hospitals are filling up, with roughly 30 more children hospitalized with severe symptoms each day. Studies conducted in the UK have found that as many as 20 percent of children develop Long COVID, in which symptoms persist months after an initial infection, while a new study has found that roughly 5 percent of children hospitalized with COVID-19 develop brain or nerve complications.

On Wednesday, the United States recorded 56,525 new COVID-19 cases, the highest official tally of any country and an increase of 465 percent in just one month as the Delta variant has become dominant. Last week, cases among children under 12 years old surged by 87 percent in Florida. Dr. Joseph Pernet, the chief medical officer at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg, told FOX 13 News, "Our last seven days, we've seen more patients than any other seven days since the pandemic began. So we're seeing a dramatic increase in

kids."

Children's hospitals in Arkansas, Missouri and a growing number of states are also reporting the highest numbers of children hospitalized with COVID-19 since last winter's surge. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, for the week ending July 15 there were 23,551 child COVID-19 cases, nearly doubling from the week prior, while an additional 236 children were hospitalized that week.

Despite the surge of infections and hospitalizations among young people, the Biden administration is pressing ahead with its campaign to fully open all schools this fall. Two weeks ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new guidelines promoting this policy while encouraging vaccinated teachers and students not to wear masks. According to a recent survey, roughly 30 percent of the 200 largest school districts in the US will not offer any remote learning option, including the first- and third-largest districts in New York City and Chicago, which serve a combined 1.4 million children.

On Thursday, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky stated at a White House press briefing, "The delta variant is more aggressive and much more transmissible than previously circulating strains." She added, "This virus has no incentive to let up, and it remains in search of the next vulnerable person to infect."

Walensky failed to reconcile these statements with the reality that roughly 42 million school-aged children remain unvaccinated, with no vaccines expected to be approved for children under 12 years old until the start of 2022 at the earliest. When this was noted in an interview last week, Walensky stated callously, "I remain emphatic that our schools need to open in the fall. They need to open for full, in-person learning."

Speaking at a CNN town hall on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden said that children under 12 years old

“should probably be wearing a mask in school,” while those over 12 years old who are vaccinated “shouldn’t wear a mask.”

Biden went on to directly lie about breakthrough infections and deaths among fully vaccinated people, stating, “You’re not going to get COVID if you have these vaccinations.” In fact, the CDC has already logged at least 791 deaths and over 5,000 hospitalization from COVID-19 among fully vaccinated people in the US.

This was not Biden’s first time lying about the pandemic. At a CNN town hall in February, Biden lied directly to a second-grader, saying “Kids don’t get ... COVID very often. It’s unusual for that to happen.”

The same lies are being told by the ruling class in every country to carry out the reckless reopening of schools. In the face of mounting opposition among parents, students, educators and the broader working class, the fascistic Bolsonaro administration is spearheading a drive to fully reopen schools across Brazil in the coming weeks, with the support of state governors from all political parties. In São Paulo, the largest school district in South America with roughly two million students, all students will be expected to attend in person with spacing between students reduced from 1.5 meters to one meter.

The global character of the drive to fully open schools arises out of a common objective necessity for the capitalist class to send working class parents back to unsafe factories and other workplaces to produce corporate profits.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported this week that roughly 9.5 million Americans were unemployed and looking for work in June. Economists note that some of the primary factors behind continued high rates of unemployment are a lack of access to affordable child care, safety concerns over COVID-19, and the extension of federal unemployment benefits.

The school reopening drive coincides with the ending of the federal moratorium on evictions on July 31 and the cutoff of federal unemployment benefits on September 6, placing enormous financial pressures on parents to send their children to unsafe schools and return themselves to unsafe workplaces.

In response to this ruling class offensive, the pro-capitalist American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), and their counterparts globally, continue to facilitate the campaign to fully open schools. NEA President Becky Pringle recently stated, “There is no substitute for in-person learning,” while AFT President Randi Weingarten stated

as early as May, “There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week.”

In justifying these policies, the politicians and union bureaucrats refer to the very real mental health crisis facing youth. But their feigned concern for the well-being of children is a smokescreen to provide cover for their homicidal policies. These same figures have said nothing of the fact that the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that roughly 1.5 million children worldwide have lost a parent or guardian from COVID-19, with an untold number of these deaths attributable to the spread of the virus through schools.

Throughout the pandemic, the *World Socialist Web Site* has continually called for a globally-coordinated emergency response to halt the spread of the virus worldwide. A cornerstone of this program has always been the demand that schools remain closed, as part of the broader shutdown of nonessential workplaces, in conjunction with the provision of ample resources to provide high quality remote learning, mental health supports, food security, income protection for parents, and all other essential needs of the working class.

Over the past school year, masses of educators sought to resist the homicidal drive to reopen schools, with the most far-sighted building Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the US and globally, independent of the unions and the capitalist political parties.

On May Day 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) issued a call for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-FRC) to provide an organizational framework and political leadership to unite the growing global network of rank-and-file committees. In the coming weeks and months, this network must be expanded in order to wage a united struggle to halt school reopenings worldwide, forge links with workers in every industry that are also entering into struggle, and implement the necessary measures to put an end to the pandemic and save lives.



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