

Reopening schools poses major risks to children's lives

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The accelerating coronavirus pandemic is a clear and present danger to children in the United States and around the world. Cases have spiked, and pediatric hospitals are increasingly overwhelmed.

In the US, again the world epicenter of the virus, an estimated 14.3 percent of all coronavirus cases have occurred in children, a percentage which has steadily increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Last week there were more than 93,000 new pediatric cases in the US, including nearly 1,000 in Mississippi schools alone, a massive jump from the 72,000 new child cases recorded during the last week of July.

Child hospitalizations are also on the rise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported that more than 1,400 children were hospitalized for COVID-19 over the past week, setting a new record of 239 child admissions each day. In total, 4.3 million children have been infected. The most tragic cases have been the estimated 445 who have died from the disease.

In addition, estimates from studies conducted in the US and United Kingdom show that tens or hundreds of thousands of those infected also have, or will have, long-term symptoms. Reports have emerged of complete short-term memory loss, extreme fatigue, insomnia and continued changes in smell and taste.

Quantitatively, these cognitive deficiencies have been measured as a loss of between two and seven IQ points. A loss of two IQ points is the equivalent of lead poisoning. A loss of seven IQ points is worse than a stroke.

Moreover, such symptoms are becoming more widespread. Data collected in the UK from last year indicated that between 2 and 4 percent of children experienced some subset of these symptoms, and that these symptoms have in some cases persisted for over a

year.

After the emergence of the Alpha variant and the now dominant Delta variant, those percentages increased substantially. Dr. Francis Collins, director of the US National Institutes of Health, noted during a congressional hearing in April that up to 15 percent of young people infected could “end up with this long-term consequence, which can be pretty devastating in terms of things like school performance.”

In the context of school reopenings, such figures are nothing short of horrific. There are roughly 50 million K-12 students in the US, along with a further 20 million college students. In the world in which they live, where federal and state governments are forcing them back to in-person learning, some 49,000 youth are threatened with death, while more than 10 million are threatened with the equivalent of lead poisoning or worse. It is as if the poisoning of Flint, Michigan is being repeated in every state.

The magnitude of what has already occurred was acknowledged by Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the US CDC. She stated before the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions last July that, “One thing just I want to note with the children is: I think we fall into this flawed thinking of saying that only 400 of these 600,000 deaths from COVID-19 have been in children. Children are not supposed to die, so 400 is a huge amount.”

At the same time, Walensky made no attempt to square these remarks with the fact that the Biden administration is still planning to send kids back to schools. That same week, Walensky asserted in an interview that “I remain emphatic that our schools need to open in the fall. They need to open for full, in-person learning.”

The head of the American Federation of Teachers,

Randi Weingarten, has joined Walensky in demanding the reopening of schools, declaring that “The number one priority is to get kids to be back in school.”

Such policy statements are rank insanity. Sending students back to schools by the Trump administration last fall, and the inevitable mixing and transmission that occurred among students, staff, teachers and parents, helped trigger the colossal surge in infections that led to a quarter million infections each day last January.

Now, before schools are fully open, new cases are already *more than double* what they were a year ago, setting the stage for a wave of cases and deaths unlike any experienced so far.

Schools also present a unique opportunity for the virus to mutate beyond the already immensely infectious Delta variant. As children are not yet able to get vaccinated, and because the dominant Delta variant is able to infect both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, it will be able to pass freely and frequently between the two populations. This raises the likelihood that a new variant will emerge that, as Dr. Anthony Fauci noted, “has an equally high capability of transmitting but is also much more severe,” one which may escape current vaccines all together.

The situation is the exact same or worse in countries around the world. In Indonesia, children make up an estimated 12.5 percent of new cases while hundreds die each week. In Brazil, recent excess death estimates have found that the number of children who have died from the pandemic is 2,975, almost triple the official number of 1,122.

The drive by government officials to reopen schools is not, however, simply a matter of individual irrationality. The international character of this drive is based on the need of the capitalist class to do everything they can to get parents back to unsafe working conditions to further extract surplus value from the working class and pay for skyrocketing corporate profits.

And while this drive is certainly propelled by various financial oligarchs, it is more fundamentally an objective process bound up with the laws of capitalist development. The rate of profit must increase, under capitalism, and for these reasons children must be sent back to school and parents sent back to work.

It is also for these reasons that capitalism as a socioeconomic system must be abolished. In a rational

society, school and non-essential business closures would be implemented immediately as a measure to stop the spread of the disease, with full financial compensation to workers and small businesses impacted by the closures. Lockdowns would be combined with the massive expansion of testing, contact tracing and necessary health care facilities to care for those infected.

Wall Street instead declares that there is “no money” to save lives while gorging itself on trillions of dollars generated off the backs of the working class. Workers must take the opposite view, that there is “no money” for capitalists and every resource necessary directed toward saving lives.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement earlier this week,

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators and parents to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and political parties, to campaign for and stop the drive to reopen schools.

The fight to stop this homicidal policy is in the interests of all workers. Rank-and-file committees should be developed in every factory and workplace, connecting opposition to school reopenings with a broader policy to stop the pandemic. This must include the demand for full income for all workers who are affected by the necessary measures to save lives.

...All those who agree with this perspective should sign up to build a rank-and-file committee at your workplace today.



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