

Three Florida educators die from COVID-19 within days of each other

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Two teachers and a teacher's assistant from Broward County Public Schools in south Florida died from coronavirus between Monday night and Wednesday morning of this week. A fourth and related death occurred as well, of a Broward County alumnus who worked with the school district through her job.

The deaths occurred the week before the county's school districts are scheduled to open, as teachers prepare to return for planning days in advance of the beginning of the school year. Since August 1, 138 teachers and staff have been infected with the coronavirus, along with at least 15 students, according to the district's coronavirus dashboard.

Broward Teachers Union President Anna Fusco identified the three teachers who died as Janice Wright, 48, a teacher at Pinewood Elementary School; Yolanda Hudson Williams, 49, a teaching assistant at Dillard Elementary School; and Katina Jones, 49, also a teacher at Dillard Elementary School.

According to press reports, all three of the teachers who died were unvaccinated. Broward County School Board Chair Rosalind Osgood said that "there are a lot of people that have still not gotten the vaccination. ... It is becoming a deadly thing for them not to be vaccinated."

Osgood made no mention, however, of the fact that teachers, staff, students and parents would not be under threat of such a "deadly thing" if schools stayed closed, along with nonessential businesses, as part of a broader campaign to suppress the virus. Instead, Florida now has an average of more than 21,000 new cases each day, a higher level than at any other time during the pandemic. The state is currently responsible for 22 percent of all new COVID cases reported in the US, along with 25 percent of all deaths from the disease.

The overall positivity rate in Florida currently stands at 18.9 percent, a number that represents a high level of community transmission, particularly since some 49.8 percent of the state's eligible population has been fully vaccinated.

Hospitals across the state are reaching the limits of their

capacity. There are 15,441 patients hospitalized for COVID-19 in the state's 261 hospitals. Over 91 percent of all ICU beds are currently occupied statewide, with nearly half occupied by COVID-19 patients.

Florida also has the highest number of pediatric COVID-19 cases of any state in the US, according to figures compiled by the Coronavirus in Kids (COVKID) Tracking and Education Project, a program of the Women's Institute for Independent Social Enquiry. The *Florida Times Union* report on the institute's findings stated, "As of Aug. 7, 8.1 per 100,000 children from birth to 17 were hospitalized in Florida with COVID-19, according to the project. From Aug. 1 to 7, 341 children up to age 17 have been hospitalized with COVID-19 in Florida.

"Florida also has the worst rate for teens ages 18 and 19 with 20.6 per 100,000 people. There were 100 new hospital admissions from Aug. 1 to 7. ... For comparison, nationwide 4.8 per 100,000 teens ages 18 and 19 and 2.2 per 100,000 children up to age 17 were hospitalized with COVID-19 as of Aug. 7, according to the project."

These tragic figures are the direct result of Governor Ron DeSantis's reopening campaign. DeSantis, a far-right Republican Trump ally considered to have presidential ambitions himself, has fought against even the most basic public health measures to contain the spread of the virus. He has gone so far as to declare school district mask mandates illegal and threaten to defund school districts and withhold pay from local school officials who defy his order.

DeSantis spearheaded the smear campaign against Rebekah Jones, the data scientist whom he fired from her position at the Florida Department of Health in May of 2020 after she publicly complained that the state was under-reporting data on COVID infections.

Parents and educators have moved to oppose DeSantis's mask ban, organizing protests in Miami-Dade County, Duval County, St. Johns County and elsewhere throughout the state. Some local school boards are defying the governor's executive order.

In Broward County, located north of Miami-Dade County

and including Fort Lauderdale, the school board voted eight to one to maintain its mask mandate. In Leon County, where the state capital Tallahassee is located, the school board implemented a mask mandate for all students through the eighth grade. Alachua County will require masks for the first two weeks of class. In Miami-Dade County, the state's largest district, school Superintendent Alberto Carvalho has indicated that a mask mandate may be implemented before classes resume on August 23.

In Duval County, masks are required, but parents are allowed to sign an "opt out" form that would allow their children to go maskless. On Tuesday, the first day of classes in Duval County, 90 teachers called in sick. There were also 13,030 students reported absent.

Last week, the state Board of Education voted unanimously to allow parents to apply for vouchers to transfer their children to private schools on the grounds of "COVID-19 harassment," defined as "any threatening, discriminatory, insulting, or dehumanizing verbal, written or physical conduct an individual student suffers in relation to, or as a result of, school districts' protocols for COVID-19, including masking requirements, the separation or isolation of students, or COVID-19 testing requirements."

Florida is the epicenter of a new and more deadly wave of COVID-19 gripping the entire country, fueled by the more virulent Delta variant. The key to this new eruption of sickness and death, which is overwhelming hospitals in many parts of the country, is the criminal policy of the entire ruling class and both of its political parties.

In the face of irrefutable data showing a disastrous increase in COVID-19 among school-age children, with 14.3 percent of all cases nationally occurring in children and pediatric wards filling up with COVID victims, the Biden administration and state and local officials of both parties are demanding the full reopening of schools on the basis of in-person learning.

Unless this homicidal policy is stopped immediately, the tragic deaths in Broward County will be a portent of a human and social catastrophe that will impact countless children, educators, school workers, parents and wider sections of the working population. This murderous and reckless policy is driven not by concern for the education or the mental health of students, as claimed by the politicians and government officials. Indeed, new scientific studies have shown that children infected with the virus, even if they recover, face a long-term decline in their cognitive ability.

It is driven rather by the naked economic interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy, which will stop at nothing—including the destruction of children's health and lives—to force workers back into virus-infected workplaces in order to fully restore the flow of profits and keep stock

prices rising ever higher.

Under these conditions, the role of the teachers unions is nothing less than criminal. Both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association are fully backing the drive to reopen the schools. They are seeking to cover their treachery by supporting requirements for vaccinating educators and requiring masking in reopened schools. But crowding 40 million unvaccinated children in schools across the country, breathing the same air and being exposed to the airborne virus, will lead to a further explosion of infections and deaths, masks or no masks.

The ongoing deaths, particularly of teachers, raises all the more urgently the need to halt the reopening of schools in an effort to suppress the spread of the coronavirus and save lives. Such public health measures will not be carried out under the auspices of state and federal governments, the school boards or the trade unions, all of which are committed to the unsafe reopening of schools.

Teachers must take the fight to save lives into their own hands. The Socialist Equality Party and its affiliated parties internationally have issued a call for educators to establish rank-and-file committees and reach out to all sections of workers to do the same, 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 necessary measures taken to save lives.

Such actions must be combined with a broad appeal to the working class in the US and internationally to wage a political struggle against the capitalist system, which has demonstrated in its incompetent and homicidal response to the coronavirus pandemic its complete bankruptcy.



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