

Oregon deploys National Guard to assist hospitals as schools set to reopen

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Oregon Governor Kate Brown announced last Friday the deployment of up to 1,500 National Guard troops to assist hospital staff as the state's emergency rooms fill with patients suffering from COVID-19. At least 20 hospitals will be receiving National Guard assistance, even as the state's plans to reopen schools for fully in-person instruction, five days a week, in early September remain unchanged.

The first 500 Guard troops will be deployed this Friday, working in primarily nonclinical roles such as materials handlers, equipment distributors and COVID-19 testing assistants. "The stress on Oregon hospitals right now is truly unprecedented. Our resources are stretched woefully thin at the same time we are seeing a frightening rise in COVID cases," said Joe Sluka, president of St. Charles Health System, to Oregon Public Broadcasting.

The Delta variant of the coronavirus now accounts for 96 percent of all pandemic-related infection samples tested in the state, according to the Oregon Health Authority, up from 15 percent six weeks ago. The seven-day average of daily new cases surpassed the previous record of 1,534 on December 5, 2020 on August 12, when 1,536 daily cases were confirmed, a number which now stands at 1,820 cases.

Hospitalizations also continue to rise, with a record 752 hospitalized, 130 more than the peak during last November's surge and before vaccines were available. An unprecedented 185 patients were in intensive care units as of Friday.

Nearly every safety measure to contain the pandemic, however, was dispensed with June 30, when Governor Brown held a "Reopening Oregon" celebration at Providence Park. At the time, the governor proclaimed, "We celebrate brighter days ahead. And today, we celebrate that Oregon is 100 percent open for

business."

Under the conditions of the current surge, Brown is determined to not walk back any of the state's reopening drive. The most that has been implemented is a statewide indoor mask mandate in the face of skyrocketing cases. All businesses remain open without restriction, and no restrictions are in place on indoor and outdoor gatherings, even after a warning of impending crisis from the Oregon Health Authority issued on July 27.

Brown has, however, been forced to note the scale of the crisis in Oregon. "When our hospitals are full with COVID-19 patients, there may not be room for someone needing care after a car crash, a heart attack, or other emergency situation." She continued, "I know this is not the summer many of us envisioned, with over 2.5 million Oregonians vaccinated against COVID-19. The harsh and frustrating reality is that the Delta variant has changed everything. Delta is highly contagious, and we must take action now."

But the governor proposes no serious actions. Instead, she has tried to place the blame for the spread of the virus in Oregon on local and county officials. A recent article by *The Oregonian* noted that Brown had placed all authority for responding to the pandemic in the hands of local officials even as cases continued to rise precipitously throughout July. On August 6, Brown explained to top officials representing all of Oregon's counties that the pandemic was now out of control. She then asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

It is under these conditions that schools statewide are scheduled to return to fully in-person learning, five days a week, in early September. Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota, informed NBC's "Meet the Press" that we

need to “rethink” the CDC guidance for children under 12 since “the data we have used to come up with recommendations for opening our schools is really from pre-Alpha. This [Delta variant] is a different virus in the sense it’s much more infectious.”

Osterholm went on to warn that there are 90 million Americans who remain unvaccinated, and 48 million children under 12 who are not eligible for a vaccine. This provides the virus with ideal conditions to spread and further mutate. The CDC school guidelines were totally inadequate when they were first put forward, and these politically motivated guidelines were formulated before the Delta variant was first identified in October 2020 in India.

The Brown administration’s current school reopening drive has been ongoing since March 5, when she issued an executive order herding children back into schools for in-person learning. Washington’s Democratic Governor Jay Inslee had issued a similar edict the previous day. In both states, and nationally, the concern has not been about saving lives but ensuring that, as Kate Brown said, they are “open for business.”

Indeed, the governor’s response to the extraordinary rise in cases, hospitalizations and deaths is in line with the political program of the Biden administration, the Democratic Party as a whole, and the corporate interests they serve. Any loss of life is preferable to the ruling elite rather than the temporary lockdown of nonessential production. Corporations with a large base in Oregon such as Nike, Daimler Trucks North America, and Precision Castparts Corp. must be allowed to extract profits from the working class unimpeded.

Brown and the corporations are also aided by the teachers unions, including the Oregon Education Association, which has not offered any resistance to the return to in-person instruction. A search on the organization’s website for the term “coronavirus” provides only two resources, both from last year, and its national affiliate, the National Education Association, offers only various ways to “ensure ... safety” as “schools and campuses reopen.” There is no suggestion that the best way to remain safe is for schools to remain closed to suppress the spread of the disease.

The response of the Democratic Party and the unions makes clear that educators cannot appeal to the very

same institutions that are responsible for the catastrophe in the first place. The teachers unions and school boards are tied to the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, a party that is entirely beholden to Wall Street and US imperialism. Educators must realize their own strength through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves. No other social force is willing or able to put forward the necessary measures to contain and eradicate the pandemic.

Teachers and workers must advocate for the shutdown of all nonessential production and the implementation of comprehensive distance learning in schools, with full compensation provided to all workers and small businesses. The money for this necessary program will come from a direct assault on the obscene profits accumulated by the billionaires. The trillions handed to Wall Street must be directed to the working-class families who desperately need it.

Contact the WSWS to connect with a rank-and-file committee in your district. The WSWS will assist any teacher in forming a rank-and-file committee if one does not already exist.



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