

Opposition grows to unsafe reopenings at South Carolina universities

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Opposition is growing in South Carolina's universities to the capitulation of administrators to the anti-scientific policies of the right-wing Republican state government of Henry McMaster, which seeks to sacrifice the needs of the population to the profit interests of the big corporations.

Over 10,000 South Carolinians have died of COVID-19 over the past 18 months, and between August 9 and August 13 alone, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control reported almost 15,000 new cases. Hospitalizations in South Carolina are higher than at this point last year contrary to the claims of Governor McMaster. The supply of ICU beds is also dangerously close to drying up. Less than half of South Carolina's eligible population is fully vaccinated.

Clemson University faculty organized a walkout that took place yesterday, the first day of class, with a rally on Bowman Field on campus.

After a state Supreme Court ruling yesterday allowed mask mandates to proceed, both Clemson and the University of South Carolina, as well as most other universities in the state, immediately reinstituted mask mandates which had been struck down by the state government, although Clemson's mask mandate will last only for the first three weeks of class.

Clemson University Associate Professor Kimberly Paul, who organized the walkout, called the limitation of the policy to three weeks "puzzling" and "a partial measure," adding that "we still have some work to do regarding reinstating a Mask Policy."

Under these conditions, schools and universities in the state are sending K-12, college, and university students and instructors back into crowded classrooms with minimal to no protections against the spread of the deadly Delta variant of COVID-19. There is no official acknowledgment of the unique dangers of this new variant, which some scientists and doctors have begun to refer to as tantamount to an entirely new virus.

In recent weeks, epidemiologists have warned that the low-quality masks that many people use are much less effective

against Delta, that casual contact (such as passing someone walking in the opposite direction on a sidewalk) is enough to transmit the virus, and that the virus can be transmitted readily outdoors. However, at the behest of Wall Street and the big corporations, state and national governments, the corporatist trade unions and university administrators are all engaged in a concerted effort to downplay the severity of the risks posed to the population by reckless school, university and workplace reopenings.

Epidemiologists and other scientists have long understood the need for a layered approach to pandemic mitigation. Taken by itself, each form of mitigation of the impact of the Delta variant, from physical distancing to masking, personal hygiene, limited exposure time, contact tracing, testing, adequate ventilation and air filtration, quarantining and isolation, to vaccination would be insufficient to halt the spread of the virus. Taken together, however, these forms of mitigation could not only contain the virus but drive it to extinction.

However, from the point of view of the capitalist class, nothing can be permitted to stand in the way of the continuous flow of profits accumulated through the exploitation of cheap labor. Consequently, all talk of another shutdown of nonessential production and a return to online instruction has been systematically excluded from official discourse. This is also why the official debate over school and university reopenings has been confined to the question of masking mandates (or, in a few cases, vaccine mandates).

As in the other seven states where state legislatures have banned masking mandates, the battle over mandates in South Carolina has been especially intense.

On August 2, South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson sent a letter to the University of South Carolina warning that the university's decision to mandate masks in classrooms was illegal. Rather than fight this attack on the welfare of students and educators, the university immediately rescinded its mandate, in spite of the fact that its president holds a Ph.D. in epidemiology.

Yesterday, at the behest of state Senator Dick Harpootlian

and a South Carolina faculty member, along with the reluctant assent of Attorney General Wilson, the state Supreme Court weighed in on the matter. According to its judgment, while the budget proviso in question limits the ability of higher education institutions to impose mask mandates on unvaccinated individuals, it does not prevent universities from imposing blanket mask mandates regardless of vaccination status.

The struggle over masking mandates in K-12 schools has been fierce and remains largely unresolved. A separate state budget proviso forbids all masking mandates in publicly funded K-12 schools. However, Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin declared a state of emergency on August 11, followed by an order that all individuals at schools and day cares serving 2-year-olds through 14-year-olds be masked.

The Columbia City Council ratified the ordinance. This was followed by the decision by Richland County Council on Monday to pass an ordinance requiring masks to be worn indoors in all public and private schools in the county serving 2 through 14-year-olds. The Charleston County School District also defied the masking mandate ban and voted on Monday to implement a mask requirement for all students, staff and campus visitors.

At the University of South Carolina, students and alumni are planning to launch a statewide South Carolina Education Rank-and-File Safety Committee in alliance with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The students and alumni have drafted a statement that opposes the complete abandonment of physical distancing measures by the university, and the exclusion of outdoor areas from its masking mandate.

It explains that the limitation of the mandate to indoor areas will create a situation where close contact with unmasked individuals on the way to class will be unavoidable. The statement calls for a complete shutdown of in-person instruction and a return to full online learning.

The statement concludes with these demands:

1. There must be an immediate shutdown of all public colleges and universities and K-12 schools in the state and a return to remote instruction, with a vast expansion of funding to ensure that every student and educator has access to high-speed internet and state-of-the-art technology.

2. All non-essential production must cease until the pandemic is brought under control with full compensation for all workers.

3. This time the shutdown must not be wasted. A serious program of contact tracing, quarantine and

vaccination must be implemented, in combination with the resources for a serious effort to raise the scientific literacy of the population as a whole to meet the challenge of the pandemic.

4. All essential workers who have not yet been vaccinated must be provided with paid leave time to get the vaccine and recover from its aftereffects.

5. Parents and other caregivers must be provided with the financial support to stay home with their children while they take part in remote education programs.

6. Before any return to in-person instruction takes place, all classrooms must have CO2 meters installed. Buildings must have MERV filters installed in their HVAC systems, and all classrooms must be tested for adequate air flow with maximum safe occupancy limits corresponding to this airflow posted on the door of every classroom. These occupancy limits must be obeyed and used to determine maximum class sizes.

7. Any relaxation of these public health measures must be approved by the South Carolina Education Rank-and-File Safety Committee in collaboration with independent and trusted medical experts.

8. The state budget proviso aimed at forbidding mask mandates in public K-12 schools must be stricken.

9. Finally, we appeal to all other teachers and workers to form rank-and-file safety committees in your own workplaces and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees! Only through a globally coordinated counteroffensive by workers can we bring the pandemic under control

The students and alumni have announced an online meeting open to all South Carolina educators, parents, caregivers, high school and college students and family members who are opposed to the unsafe reopening plans of the schools and universities in South Carolina. To register for the meeting, please click here.



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