

Northern Indiana nurse on lifting of mask mandates: “Children are like petri dishes—we can’t take risks with children’s lives”

George Kirby
27 August 2021

As of August 16, there were total of 37,234 positive cases among students and more than 13,000 among teachers and staff reported to the Indiana Department of Health. After the sharp drop of the positivity rate due to vaccination and brief mitigation, rates have increased again since June 21, reaching 10.2 percent. On April 6, Republican Governor Eric Holcomb joined Republican and Democratic governors nationwide in loosening restrictions. Despite the increase in cases, the demand has been to get schools and workplaces reopened.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a northern Indiana nurse protesting against the removal of mask mandates in schools on Facebook groups with fellow parents. Mary described the conditions of the pandemic and her opposition to the removal of mask mandates. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

In Mary’s town of Michigan City, schools opened on August 18, and LaPorte, Indiana, 10 miles away, has a no mask mandate. LaPorte went against the state’s recommendation of mandating masks.

“We shall see in the next week, hopefully our numbers stay great for children,” she said. “But by what we are seeing in the South and what we’re seeing in the schools that have masks on everyone will do much better than the ones that don’t.”

COVID-19 cases are rising sharply with the reopening of schools across the US underway.

Mary described the effects on her hospital of children going back to school: “We went from dismantling the COVID unit and only having a few positive cases to reopening COVID units. Here in northern Indiana, the schools are just opening so we’re not seeing kids yet in the hospital. I’m really, really hopeful that we don’t,

but with them going back into school starting tomorrow in this area, and the numbers increasing, I’m sure we will.”

In Los Angeles, 600,000 public school students and 24,000 teachers have been brought back to in-person classes. Mary stated that major pediatric hospitals in Texas and Louisiana are filled to capacity. The New Orleans Public School District’s 3,000 students and employees have been quarantined this week due to outbreaks. About 577 students and 352 employees tested positive just this month.

Already, almost 20 percent of ICU beds in Indiana are filled by COVID patients, while 27 percent of all ICU beds are available. Even though the state has not yet reached the reported peak of 3,381 hospitalizations last year, cases have continued to rise since July. Regardless of the risks, schools are reopening and workplaces are keeping workers on the job.

Mary related the broader conditions to what she has seen in Indiana:

“Riley Children’s Hospital in Indianapolis just last week alone treated 36 children in their ICU unit. Here in Indiana, the school system just put out that even if we go into the red [high positivity and community spread], they will remain open and will be treated case by case. I think when it comes to children if you have a huge number of them affected you have to shut it down. Unfortunately, children are like petri dishes to begin with and will spread it like wildfire. We can’t take risks with children’s lives; we just cannot. We haven’t even entered the time period of children’s normal viruses, like RSV [respiratory syncytial virus] and flu.”

Health care workers have noted surges among children diagnosed with COVID-19 and RSV. Dr.

Pannaraj, an infectious diseases specialist at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, noted that this phenomenon puts "babies up until about a year and a half or two years of life" at risk. Even before the pandemic, hospital workers faced a crisis with the epidemic of nurse burnout. Like all sections of the working class, hospital workers have felt the brunt of the rising cases.

In 2019, nurses conducted a strike at St. Vincent hospital in Toledo, Ohio over pay, staffing and forced overtime that undermined patient care. With the pandemic escalating hospitalizations, hospital workers who are already understaffed are spread thin.

At St. Vincent hospital in Massachusetts, nurses are continuing their three-month-long struggle against the Tenet Healthcare operator. Without answering the demand for better staffing ratio, the hospital proposed increased wages and bonuses to end the strike. The hospital hired replacement nurses in May and has posted additional job openings to break the strike.

The Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) has minimized the strike-breaking effort. In May, the MNA presented a contract proposal that was thoroughly denounced by rank-and-file nurses. While the Tenet company has profited over \$414 million throughout the pandemic, the MNA and AFL-CIO have isolated these nurses and provided no strike pay. Rather, the MNA has promoted illusions in the Democratic Party and has no intention of mobilizing wider working class support for the striking nurses.

Five hundred nurses from McLaren Macomb Hospital near Detroit have voted 90 percent for strike action. Nurses have been handling patient loads of six patients at a time.

In New Zealand, 1,500 public hospital midwives joined by parents and students held an eight-hour strike in the second week of August for increase in staffing and funding for health care. The new Delta variant sweeping internationally puts more pressure on hospital workers and an already precarious health care system.

A nurse in Sri Lanka described COVID-19 wards not being properly cleaned and nurses become infected. Like in the US, Sri Lanka also faces a shortage of hospital workers, mainly due to the vast amount of infections and lack of investment in health care infrastructure.

Moved by Massachusetts nurses on strike, Mary spoke of conditions of nurses in Portage, Indiana. "In a

hospital in Portage, Indiana they've now decided that they can have eight patients. What hospitals are doing to the nurses is absolutely insane and I support nurses going on strike 100 percent. They are being used and abused, bringing in traveling nurses paying them \$150 to \$200 an hour. Meanwhile, their staff nurses are being mistreated and dumped; nursing is not good right now. What people don't understand is nurses could up and walk out and cripple our hospital system."

Hospitals and other businesses—along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Biden administration and the corporate-controlled unions--instead of following the science, are telling people in the midst of a new surge of the pandemic that that they have earned the right to take their masks off and have opposed shutdowns of schools and businesses. In a May speech, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten declared, "There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week." Later, she added, "Given current circumstances, nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open."

Even before school reopenings, the American Academy of Pediatrics noted over 121,000 new cases during the second week of August. The safeguarding of children and the livelihoods of workers through the eradication of COVID-19 can be achieved with an allocation of needed social resources. The Democrats and Republicans have centered the discussion as one of pro- or against mask mandates, as they defend the insatiable drive for profit of the financial oligarchy.

However, numerous epidemiologists have demonstrated and argued that a total shutdown is required to eradicate the pandemic. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all parents, workers and students to form rank-and-file committees as part of a national and international campaign to stop the murderous school reopening drive and to fight for the shutdown of nonessential production, with compensation for all workers.



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