

Delta variant surges in Hawaii while schools remain open

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Like the rest of the United States, the Hawaiian Islands are feeling the deadly effects of the pandemic surge fueled by the Delta variant even with one of the highest vaccination rates in the country. The situation across the state is becoming increasingly dire with hospitals running out of space and the morgue in Honolulu running at 40 percent over capacity. Last Friday saw two single-day records being set in the state with nine new deaths and 1,035 new cases.

While the Honolulu morgue can hold up to 60 people, as of Friday morning, there were 51 bodies being held there, with seventeen in a mortuary trailer that was deployed on Tuesday to help cope with the rise in deaths. There were also fourteen bodies being held at a back-up storage facility on Friday that is also rapidly running out of space.

It was only two weeks ago that Hawaii's hospitals were almost completely overwhelmed, and there is still a re-route order in place for ambulances on Oahu to ensure that individual hospitals do not become overwhelmed. The situation has become so dire that Democratic Governor David Ige began encouraging tourists to think twice before traveling to Hawaii as well as saying he has not ruled out a lockdown if the numbers continue to worsen.

Given the surge of the pandemic over the course of the last few weeks, and the fact that 163,000 students are currently enrolled in public schools in Hawaii, one would think that schools would have already returned to remote learning in Hawaii, but that is not the case. In keeping with the policies laid down by the Biden administration, Hawaii's schools have not only remained open during the surge, there has been no call to close them down by the Democrats or Republicans.

The Premier Medical Group (PMG) conducted more than 500 COVID-19 tests on the big island of Hawaii over the course of the last weekend and found that over one third of minors tested positive. This corresponds to data released by the Department of Health stating that the number of infections among children has exploded by almost 15 times since the end of June when there was an average of 18 cases among children for every 100,000 residents.

Shortly thereafter, the Department of Education (DOE) made the claim that there was no spread in schools during the first two weeks they were open despite the fact that the department itself reported 430 cases in schools during the same time period.

Dr. Scott Miscovich, who is with PMG, expressed his skepticism over the state's assertions. "I do believe that the spread through the schools is very understated," the doctor said, adding, the students are "only 3 feet away. You combine that with masks that are tilted open on the sides, and they sit there in one class for 40 minutes or 45 minutes, we recommend an entire class get tested if one child in that class is positive." Dr. Miscovich then stated in no uncertain terms, 'Our backs are well past being against the wall. We are now at the point where there's only one option, and that option is closing down, plain and simple.'

Currently Hawaii has seen 60,551 cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began and a total of 587 deaths out of a population of 1.46 million people. The seven-day average of new cases stands at 730 with the test positivity rate increasing over the course of the last two weeks by sixteen percent to 8.2 percent. The percentage of the state that is vaccinated currently stands at 62.6 percent with over 70 percent of the population having received the first shot. The nine new deaths on Friday equaled the total number of deaths for the previous week.

On August 10, Governor Ige instituted new COVID-19 restrictions in the state limiting outdoor gatherings to 25 and indoor gatherings to ten. In an admission that these limits were not being enforced, at least on Oahu, Honolulu Mayor Rick Blangiardi reiterated those restrictions last week by stating that beginning on Wednesday, August 25, all large gatherings on the island of Oahu will be limited to ten people indoors and 25 people outdoors.

In accordance with the statewide order however, exemptions are provided for organized recreational sports, religious services, restaurants, bars, as well as farmer's markets and craft fairs with no entertainment, and, as with everywhere else in the United States, schools.

After the press conference, parents and workers were immediately struck by this dichotomy and responded angrily on social media, with one parent saying, “But not schools! Got it! Perfectly okay to cram 30+ students in a classroom with this surge going thru the islands!!”

Another responded by stating, “My daughter-in-law teaches HS, 32 students in an old portable!”

Yet another exclaimed, “When are the people gonna rebel?”

An apt question when one looks at the conditions facing workers and the non-existent options that are presented to them by the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA), whose Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Board of Education (BOE) expired on June 30. Despite the deadly surge, the HSTA has blocked any resistance by educators to this criminal policy and has colluded with state and federal officials to open and keep open the schools.

The HSTA published an open letter on August 18 appealing to the BOE to negotiate a new MOU. The letter includes some damning indictments of BOE officials, regarding the dangerous conditions teachers and students face. Without acknowledging it, the letter is also an exposure of the HSTA, which has accepted these deadly conditions.

The letter is a result of a survey in which 80 percent of teachers responded to the question of whether they felt safe or not with the answer that conditions at their schools were very unsafe. Regarding social distancing, a teacher from Honolulu is quoted saying, “There is barely enough space to fit desks in the room so forget about safety. It’s just pack them in as much as possible. We keep procedures in the classroom, but at lunch, the cafeteria is overfilled. We have whole grade-level assemblies of 100 kids at a time, and recess is kids hanging all over each other and in everyone’s face with and without masks worn properly. It’s an absolute free for all.”

Another teacher on the island of Hawaii said, “I already have had to call parents of students who think it’s a joke to wear a mask and repeatedly and purposely wear them incorrectly, exposing noses, or just take them off in class. I have seen students go to off-limits areas that aren’t monitored as well, take off their masks, and some engage in PDA [Public Displays of Affection]. While I understand the urgent developmental need for socialization and human contact, it’s unsettling to see rules being disregarded and more opportunities for the spread of the coronavirus.”

In a particularly revealing comment pointing to not only the difficulty in enforcing safety guidelines, but also the lack of basic ventilation, one teacher stated, “Students do not keep masks on. Kids take them on and off. It’s a battle to keep them on and it is incredibly hot in our classrooms that are not air-conditioned, which makes it even harder to

enforce as students are profusely sweating and are more uncomfortable breathing through sweat-soaked masks.”

Considering that the virus is aerosolized, classes being held indoors without working air conditioners could be a death sentence, if not for the students themselves, then their family members, friends and others with whom they come in contact, including educators.

The quotes cited are just a sample of the angry statements over the conditions in schools. If the HSTA was a genuine workers organization, it would not tolerate this. But the HSTA, like its parent organization, the National Education Association (NEA) and its counterpart the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are run by affluent executives and function as the direct tools of the Biden administration, the Democratic Party and the profit system it defends. Even if the union reached another MOU, it would be nothing more than window dressing for endangering the lives of educators, students and communities. Predictably, the open letter does not call for a return to remote learning, even as it acknowledges that this is the only safe alternative.

Teachers, parents, students and workers of Hawaii should place no confidence in either the government or the HSTA to do what is needed to combat the virus. Neither will do more than implement haphazard measures to mitigate the effects of the virus while it continues its deadly rampage. The only solution to the pandemic is eradication, and the only force that can ensure that is the working class. Workers must urgently form rank-and-file safety committees to combat the reckless policy being carried out by the government with the collusion of the trade unions. We urge teachers, parents and students to join the growing network of national and international rank-and-file safety committees to save lives.



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