All US schools must be closed as part of a strategy to eradicate COVID-19!

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The reopening of K-12 schools throughout the United States has already proven to be disastrous and is fueling a major surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Johns Hopkins University data, the seven-day average of daily new cases is now 137,270, more than triple the average seen on Labor Day of last year. Over four million Americans have been infected in the past month alone. Similar surges are taking place in the UK, Germany, France, Brazil and other countries where schools have reopened as vaccination rates stall and the pandemic is nowhere near eliminated.

Most alarmingly, 251,781 children were infected with COVID-19 for the week ending September 2, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. This is the highest level of cases among children since the pandemic began, and five times the level just one month ago.

The global policy of reopening schools as COVID-19 infections spiral out of control sharply expresses the differences between the three strategies that have emerged towards the COVID-19 pandemic: "herd immunity," mitigation and eradication.

The catastrophe in the US makes clear the need to immediately close all schools as part of a broader strategy of eliminating COVID-19 in the US and ultimately eradicating the virus worldwide. This strategy is based on science, which proves that eradication can be achieved through the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, mass vaccinations, travel restrictions, masking, universal testing, contact tracing and the isolation of infected patients. Recent estimates by the *Economist* that the real global death toll from COVID-19 stands at roughly 15.2 million people underscore the urgency of popularizing this strategy in the working class.

Herd immunity through school reopenings

The full reopening of schools, effectively cramming over 40 million unvaccinated children in confined classrooms with poor ventilation to become infected with COVID-19, is the most brutal manifestation of the "herd immunity" strategy advanced by sections of the ruling class. Premised on the false claim that the most vulnerable sections of the population can be "shielded" from infection by rapidly infecting the young, this strategy in practice exposes all of society to the virus and accepts that millions will die.

The following figures indicate the scale of the social crime being committed against children, educators and the broader population in the US through the reopening of schools:

• A record average of 365 children were hospitalized every day last week, with pediatric hospitals reaching capacity in states throughout the South.

• In the past month, 73 children died from COVID-19, the highest level of child deaths in the US since the start of the pandemic.

• Over 197 deaths among school personnel have been tracked so far this school year by the Twitter page #SchoolPersonnelLostToCovid, with most taking place in August.

• Multiple educators have died in the same school or district this semester in Waco, Texas; Bulloch County, Georgia; Polk County, Florida, and more.

• At least 15 educators and staff in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools District have reportedly died from COVID-19 over a recent 10-day span.

• In Texas, where mask mandates are banned in schools, 27,353 students tested positive for COVID-19 for the week ended August 29, up 51 percent from the previous week.

A generation of young people is being sickened with unknown long-term consequences. Preliminary findings from the world's largest study on Long COVID in children indicate that 14 percent of children who test positive for COVID-19 have three or more symptoms linked to the virus 15 weeks later, with the most common being fatigue and headaches.

The surge of infections, hospitalizations and deaths has also made school reopenings utterly chaotic. At least 1,000 schools in 35 states have had to switch to remote learning this school year due to infections among students and staff, according to the data service Burbio. In Kentucky, one fifth of all school districts have had to close, and comparable figures exist in many states where schools have been open for weeks.

These facts make clear that the claims made by politicians, the media and union officials that reopening schools could be done "safely" and was meant solely to improve children's learning and emotional well-being were nothing but cynical lies.

The reopening of K-12 schools also coincides with the reopening of colleges and universities to in-person learning, with essentially no mitigation measures. There have already been significant outbreaks at Duke University, the University of California, the University of Michigan and many other schools where vaccination rates are high. The reopening of Appalachian State University in North Carolina has contributed to a rise in the case positivity rate in the area to record levels. Packed football stadiums with tens of thousands of students and fans, as seen over Labor Day weekend, will inevitably become mass superspreader events, leading to countless new cases and deaths.

From the beginning, the real motive behind the reopening of schools has always been economic, determined by the needs of the corporations to send parents back to work. In July, Biden's top economic adviser Brian Deese bluntly stated that one of the primary factors behind the ongoing "labor shortage" has been a lack of "childcare and school, particularly for parents of school-aged kids." The opening of schools coincides with the cutting off of federal unemployment benefits and the scrapping of the eviction moratorium, threatening millions of families with destitution and homelessness unless they send their children to unsafe schools and return to unsafe workplaces.

The "herd immunity" strategy is exhibited grotesquely in the banning of

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mask mandates in schools in Republican-led states, including Arizona, Arkansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, Florida, South Carolina, Texas and Utah, which have among the highest rates of infections and deaths, including among children. A scientific paper published in early August estimated that in such schools, roughly 91 percent of students could become infected with COVID-19 within three months of the start of the school year, with most students infected by the end of the first month due to an exponential growth in cases.

Mitigations in schools: "Herd immunity" with palliative care

The second pandemic strategy—mitigation—advances the false claim that through masking and the vaccination of staff and eligible children above 12 years old, schools can be reopened "safely." While mitigation claims to be an alternative to "herd immunity," it is in reality only a modification of this strategy aimed at dulling its razor-sharp edges.

Democratic Party politicians, union officials and media representatives who promote school reopenings with "mitigations" know that this policy will inevitably infect millions of children and deepen the spread of COVID-19. They only seek to do so at a slower pace to prevent the overwhelming of hospitals and other social services. Their mitigation efforts are directed not against the virus, but against the consequences of the "herd immunity" policies.

In particular, the claim that vaccination is a universal solution to the pandemic attributes to vaccines properties that they do not have. Not only is a substantial portion of the population unvaccinated, including all children under 12, but the continued propagation of the virus creates conditions for the evolution of new, more infectious and vaccine-resistant variants. Vaccinated individuals can still contract and spread the virus, and the emergence of the Delta variant has led to a surge of "breakthrough infections," involving the illness and even death of previously vaccinated individuals.

Vaccination is a powerful tool. However, disconnected from a broader strategy aimed at rapidly reducing new infections to zero and thus eradicating COVID-19, vaccination and other mitigations amount to nothing more than palliative care.

The most vocal advocate of school reopenings with "mitigations" is American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who has spent the past month on a 20-state "Back to School for All" tour, flying across the US to promote this homicidal policy. In an extraordinary statement published on Labor Day, Weingarten claimed that AFT members are experiencing "joy that we're headed back to a new school year in person."

She wrote, "The Delta variant hasn't changed our resolve to keep our schools open and ensure they are safe, healthy and welcoming for all. It has, however, made it even more critical for us to use the tools we know will keep our school communities safe: vaccinations, masks, ventilation, hand-washing, distancing, testing, and clear protocols if an outbreak occurs."

Having written her statement after most school districts have already reopened, Weingarten knows that in the vast majority of schools these measures have not been implemented. Vaccinations are not mandatory, masking is haphazard, upwards of 30,000 US schools have antiquated ventilation systems, many schools lack supplies of soap and paper towels, distancing is nonexistent in classrooms with 30 or more students, testing is inadequate and outbreak protocols are chaotic.

Many scientists, rank-and-file workers, parents and people involved in the field of public health personally believe that the elimination and eventual eradication of COVID-19 should be the basis and goal of policy. However, confronting immense governmental and institutional opposition, they have concluded that this correct and necessary policy will never be implemented. Even with the best of motives, they retreat to the mitigation strategy and advocate the broadest suite of measures, including ventilation, social distancing, daily testing, contact tracing and more. However they may seek to justify it, this approach is false.

Any retreat to the mitigation strategy, even in the hope of saving as many lives as possible, is a mistake and evades the scientific reality of viral transmission in schools. Only through the development of mass consciousness and a scientific understanding of the eradication strategy by broad layers of the working class will the pandemic be brought to an end.

The role of school closures in the eradication strategy

Schools have long been known to be major centers of viral transmission. A study published in January showed that this is no different for COVID-19. Researchers found that COVID-19 infections in children ages 10-19 preceded an increase in cases among adults ages 30-49, meaning that infected children were infecting their parents, not the reverse.

The fundamental precept of the elimination-eradication strategy is that COVID-19 relies on a human host to propagate and the only way it can be suppressed is by cutting off all avenues of transmission. This requires the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, travel restrictions, mass testing, masking, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and other basic public health measures, combined with mass vaccinations.

In a WSWS webinar held on August 22, Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary made clear that aggressive public health measures could have brought new cases to zero within 37 days in early 2020, saving millions of lives. Given the transmissibility of the Delta variant, her model estimated that the combination of vaccines and aggressive public health measures can still eliminate the virus in a given country in the space of two months. Stressing that vaccines alone are not sufficient to stop transmission, she said, "We need everything we have in our toolbox to stop it, to slow it down."

The elimination strategy has been highly effective in China, a mass society with over 1.4 billion people, as well as in New Zealand and other countries, through the use of the suite of public health measures outlined above. After eliminating COVID-19, these countries have now fought off repeated outbreaks of the Delta variant imported via international travel.

The most recent outbreak in China has been confined to a quarantine hotel in Guangzhou designed for international travelers. Last Saturday, Xu, a 42-year-old worker at the hotel, tested positive for COVID-19 and was immediately put under medical observation at a nearby hospital, as happens with all COVID-19 patients in China. Mass testing was carried out in the surrounding neighborhoods and by midnight Saturday all of the 92,185 samples collected were negative. All those who had close contact with Xu have also been put under medical observation at safe locations.

The response by China, New Zealand and other capitalist governments shows that the pandemic can be fought. The necessary public health measures they have implemented are in no way "authoritarian," as decried by virtually the entire political and media establishment in the US. Rather, they demonstrate the potential that exists to mobilize society's resources to eliminate COVID-19. If carried out in a globally coordinated manner in every country, the pandemic could be swiftly brought to an end.

The eradication strategy intersects with the developing movement of the working class against the subordination of public health to private profit. Over the past year, the hostility of educators and parents to school reopenings has been deliberately stifled by the unions and the Democratic Party, but it is beginning to develop through protests, sickouts and strikes

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by parents, students and education workers in Alabama, Tennessee, Hawaii, Georgia and a growing number of states. This opposition must be focused on the implementation of the eradication strategy.

For decades, the American ruling class has gutted public education and cultivated backwardness and individualism, creating the conditions where millions are now vaccine skeptics. Every effort must be made to educate the population about the science of the pandemic, the necessity to eradicate COVID-19 and how this can be achieved.

The sacrifice of tens of millions of lives on the altar of corporate profit ranks among the most horrific crimes in modern history. The “herd immunity” and mitigation policies of the ruling elites will not be reversed outside of the building of a mass movement of the working class. In every part of the country and globally, mass protests and strikes to close schools and nonessential workplaces must be prepared.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of the teachers unions and both big business parties, have been formed throughout the US and globally to prioritize workers’ lives over profits. This network must be built in every school district and neighborhood to fight for the immediate closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, combined with the provision of ample resources to all workers affected and to provide high quality remote learning. Such a movement will quickly spread across industries and countries, as rank-and-file committees prove to be the only form through which the necessary measures will be implemented to eliminate and ultimately eradicate COVID-19 on a world scale.

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